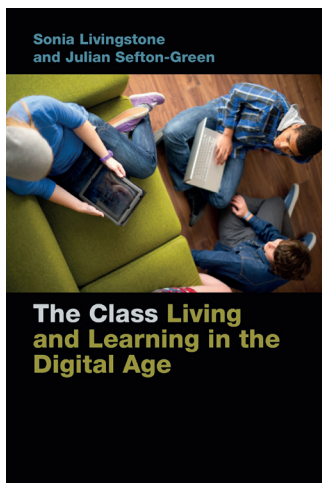# 3
The Class: Living and Learning in the Digital Age

Interview with Sonia Livingstone

Sonia Livingstone is Professor of Social Psychology in the Department of Media and Communications at London School of Economics. Taking a comparative, critical and contextualised approach, Sonia's research asks why and how the changing conditions of mediation are reshaping everyday practices and possibilities for action, identity and communication rights. Her empirical work examines the opportunities and risks afforded by digital and online technologies, including for children and young people at home and school, for developments in media and digital literacies, and for audiences, publics and the public sphere more generally, with a recent focus on children's rights in the digital age. She leads the project, Preparing for a Digital Future, which follows the recently-completed project, The Class, both part of the MacArthur Foundation-funded Connected Learning Research Network. She directed the 33-country network, EU Kids Online, funded by the EC's Better Internet for Kids programme, with impacts in the UK and Europe.[1]

You and Julian Sefton-Green recently launched the book The Class: Living and Learning in the Digital Age. Could you tell us about the project?

Our book is about a class of 13- to 14-year-olds at an ordinary urban secondary school in London. This is a famously tricky age for parents and teachers, and for young people themselves. We were curious about what young people want, how they see the world, and how they find a path through the opportunities and constraints they face. Our

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media [are becoming] more digital, convergent, commercialised and intensely networked, but is it useful to take a step further and describe our lives as 'digital lives' – as in the now-commonplace terms 'digital parenting'…'digital natives'…'digital learning' or 'digital creativity'?

We did not expect simple answers, but rather we hoped to provoke a contemplation of the uncertainties and ambiguities associated with the evolving interrelations between technological and social change. And while we certainly did not assume that teenagers' lives today bear no relation to those of previous generations, we did want to explore the ways they think about and try to manage socio-technical change, including how they cope with the personal risks associated with changes often beyond their control.

When researching The Class, you said the most important thing was to focus on ordinary rather than exceptional uses of media among 13-year-olds. Did you find that they do explore creativity through learning, creating and sharing, and can you give some examples?

Our work is part of the MacArthur Foundation-funded Connected Learning Research Network, where we were inspired by the possibility that '*connected learning taps the opportunities provided by digital media to more easily link home, school, community and peer contexts of learning; support peer and intergenerational connections based on shared interests; and create more connections with nondominant youth, drawing from capacities of diverse communities' (Ito et al., 2013).* But, having heard from our colleagues about the adventurous achievements of pioneering young people forging exceptional pathways to creativity, we decided instead to inquire into the experiences of an ordinary class of children from a fairly typical London suburb. Could we identify what makes some stand out while others do not? Could we, even, pinpoint some advice for parents, teachers and policy makers to support more young people in harnessing digital media for creative and civic purposes?

I'll answer your question by focusing on how the class used YouTube, now the most popular app among UK teenagers. Its popularity doesn't imply homogeneity in meaning or use, however, for the 28 teens in the class revealed 28 different patterns of use. But only six of them had ever uploaded anything, raising important questions about how young people's digital interests can be supported and sustained.

Could you give us some examples?

Abby and Salma, for instance, had spent a happy day setting up a YouTube channel and posting 8-10 episodes of 'The Abby and Salma Show' before retreating in mortification when their history teacher got wind of their efforts and showed everyone. Megan had a period of making videos and uploading them to YouTube too, describing herself as 'obsessed' with searching YouTube, going to meet-ups and so forth. But for her, too, this had become embarrassing, and she turned her attention to a private exploration of identity in Tumblr. Nick was more persistent, having paired up with a friend with editing skills to make videos of his Xbox game play and upload them as tutorials for others. Giselle, perhaps the most creative girl in the class, had created her own YouTube channel for stop-frame animation – like the others, she collaborated with a friend in this creative practice, gaining several hundred views before she, too, gave it up.

What is the price for young learners if schools do not incorporate youth self-expression and creativity in their curriculum spaces and practices?

As these examples show, youthful creativity in the class benefited little from the input of teachers or, indeed, parents. Both tend to dismiss these creative activities as kids wasting their time watching silly videos about people falling off walls or cute kittens. This is partly because even the most attentive parents spend relatively little time with their children online, instead watching at a distance with half an eye on the time, worrying about homework or exercise, or judging the quality of the results rather than asking if their child is progressing in a creative or critical direction.

As you can see, I see huge missed opportunities here. Parents have invested considerable sums in equipping their home with digital technology but they invest rather less time in sharing the experience with their child so as to scaffold their learning in productive directions. Meanwhile, teachers are pressured to deliver the curriculum within the walls of the school but are often sceptical about children's chances of interest-driven, self-managed learning at home.

As I said, 28 children make for 28 stories, so our conclusions must be nuanced. Joel was something of a sad case. In an unusually forthcoming

interview for this shy and seemingly unhappy boy on the edge of the social scene, he talked with enthusiasm about using YouTube tutorials combined with music-making software and mixing decks to record his own music on the computer. And yet the interview unravelled when I pushed a little further – for it turned out that such activities were not practically possible at home (or indeed in the rather standardised music technology lessons I witnessed at school). Rather, his account was aspirational; these are things he has heard about and hopes to follow up in the future.

While Joel seems to be missing out on opportunities he would relish, Alice represents a contrary case. She didn't really bother with YouTube much – but it would be wrong to characterise her as apathetic or uncreative. For Alice turned out to be incredibly active in her local community – with babysitting, Girl Guides, community events – and she also did singing, trampolining, netball and ice-skating out of school, and arts and crafts, DIY and photography at home. Is it really necessary, one wonders, for a 13-year-old girl to also get creative in uploading stuff to YouTube for society to celebrate her achievements?

Image 1. Parents have equipped their home with digital technology

Meanwhile, Gideon was something of a paradox. At school, and online, he stood right at the centre of the social network – the boy who cracked jokes, played football and computer games with the boys, had twice as many friends on Facebook as anyone else. Yet at home, when we got to know him better, he was quieter, revealing some past difficulties requiring 'anger management' classes and, now, a quiet reliance on the succour of his immediate family. Interestingly, his use of YouTube was fairly edgy – 'America's hardest prisons', 'Angry Scottish guy kicks

and snatches', 'Jamaican gangs.' Perhaps he was working through some residual anger? Or perhaps he was gathering the material to impress his classmates the next day to maintain his edgy reputation?

Even when they are creative online, it's hard to be sure if this brings long-term benefits. In an interview with Giselle a few years later, I discovered that she is, indeed, pursuing an artistic career. Was the early experimentation with YouTube a valuable stepping stone? Perhaps, though this was surely outweighed by the significant help she received throughout her childhood from her professionally artistic parents.

This diversity depends on home resources – financial, parental, cultural – and on each young person's particular bent and interests. On the one hand, several of these stories invite the question: with more support, could the kids have taken their creative first steps much further, gaining vital skills for the digital age? On the other hand, their stories invite the observation that, given everything else that's going on in their lives, engaging with YouTube may not be their top priority.

If you could send a message to parents and teachers about children's and youth's media creative production based in a 'bedroom culture' what would you say? What do they need to be aware of and/or inspired by?

The Class shows that, while parents and teachers often have young people's best interests at heart, they do not always agree on what these best interests are, leaving young people let down by the broken pathways offered to them yet not sustained across home and school. Meanwhile, young people are trying to find their own way, not necessarily seeing eye to eye with their parents or teachers and even avoiding beneficial opportunities so as to maintain 'positive disconnections' — offline and online spaces to pursue their own meanings and experiences away from the gaze of parents and teachers.

Given the inevitable tensions between children and adults about the values and practices, often based on the fact that children and young people focus on the here-and-now while parents and teachers tend to interpret everything through the lens of 'the future' – and a highly competitive future at that (future 'success', 'keeping up', 'getting ahead') – what message would I offer?

A year with 28 young people was, first and foremost, heartening as an experience of youthful optimism, enthusiasm and, for the most part, resilience. But the same year with their parents was more chequered – sometimes affirming but often anxious, with anxieties centring disproportionately on digital media rather than the many other things parents have to worry about (quality of relationships, financial security, health, community tensions, their children's growing independence, etc.). Of course, in reality, parents worried about all these things, but the very fact that these endemic concerns are, somehow, crystallised by the digital, with the digital acting as a lightning rod for so many parental uncertainties means that, ironically, parents find it difficult to support the potential benefits of digital media.

For teachers, under ever greater pressure in our competitive and standardised school systems, it is the promise of digital media for alternative, non-standardised activities, and for collaborative rather than individually-assessed outcomes, blurring the boundary between home and school, that appears so challenging. As a result, they too struggle to support children's creative digital activities.

My message should, by now, be obvious. Attribute problems where they rightfully occur and don't target the media as an easy object of blame. Ask children what they enjoy about digital media and find ways to help them deepen and develop their skills. Judge their activities by the child's level of enthusiasm and sense of progressing rather than with an adult or competitive eye to the outcomes. And, last, recognise that digital media represent an opportunity for many children to explore private emotions and interests in a world that is increasingly surveilled and constrained by anxious adults. So maybe just leave them be.

Note

1. http://www.lse.ac.uk/media%40lse/WhosWho/AcademicStaff/SoniaLivingstone.aspx

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