

Schooling the smartphone

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Schooling the smartphone

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In many parts of the world today smartphone ownership has become a ubiquitous and seemingly necessary marker of young adulthood, acting as a potent symbol of connection and social participation. Furthermore, a growing body of evidence suggests that smartphones and other mobile devices are increasingly important in the lives of young and very young children too (Marsh et al, 2015; Merchant, 2016). But although this accounts for most of the school population, educators still face complex and often conflicting demands when it comes to formulating a cogent response to the presence and use of such devices in educational settings (Burnett & Merchant, 2018). Caught between discourses of risk and exploitation on the one hand and those of unfettered digital optimism on the other, they often find themselves in situations in which these technologies are already present, and present in all their ambiguity.

Boundaries between everyday life and school are already beginning to blur, and the distinctions between life on- or off-screen, and on- or off-line seem to have become largely irrelevant (Davies, 2014; Carrington, 2017). Smartphones come to school anyway, whether they remain in teachers' pockets, students' bags or quarantined in specially designated ways (see Gilje, this issue). At other times they are displayed on tables, resting between flurries of handheld activity, much as they do in many other private and public places (Juvonen et al., this issue). All this then, makes a special issue on smartphones in classrooms an important and timely contribution.

The papers in this collection tend to focus on the later stages of schooling and are mostly located in upper secondary classrooms, and this is unsurprising given current patterns of ownership. A consistent theme, even when it is not the researchers' explicit focus, is the way in which these digital devices are implicated in mediating identity performances of various kinds, whether these relate to expressions of the freedom of young adulthood (Paakkari et al, this issue), the maintenance of ambient sociability (Olin-Scheller et al, this issue) or enactments of multilingualism (Rusk, this issue). In other papers, smartphones feature like totems, markers of territory, or as vehicles for exploring other territories (Sahlstrom et al, this issue) – mutable but invariably tethered to the individual. It would be interesting to know the extent to which this is an age-related phenomenon, exclusive to young adulthood, and if it is, what its antecedents might look like. But in a more immediate and practical sense, how seriously should educators take this identity work? For instance, are the multilingual practices described in detail by Rusk, an educational opportunity or simply a description of how things are in the late modern world?

The ubiquity of social media comes as no surprise, as time and again these researchers refer to WhatsApp, Snapchat, Instagram and Tumblr. These apps require little description, we're

all familiar with them - they work well on mobile devices and they have insinuated themselves into students' everyday lives as well as into the lives of the scholars and academics that research them (although there is little mention of *this* in the Special Issue). Where, I wonder, is the reflexivity and criticality that we need as we discover more about digital labour and the attention economy and their potent relationship to consumerism, political manipulation and the rise of populism? Alongside all this two key issues present themselves as one reads across these papers. Firstly, new practices and new habits of mind are reconfiguring what it means to know and what it means to find out, and this of course has profound implications for how we think about learning and teaching – or on a grander scale, the overall purpose of public education. And secondly, since so much of what occurs in the digital world is hidden from view, both from those who are co-present (Sahlstrom et al.) and from the user (Paakkari et al.), new kinds of critical literacy are required (Burnett & Merchant, 2011). Paakkari et al. have plenty that speaks to this, but their provocative paper leaves us wondering how to balance the invisible digital labour of students with their innocent and playful sociality. Perhaps we shouldn't seek premature closure on this debate, partly because it invites further sociotechnical considerations. Smartphones like tablets are many things. Take for example, the hidden stories of mineral extraction, cheap labour and e-waste (Burnett & Merchant, 2017) – the complexities that produce the 'layered architecture' (Yoo et al., 2010) of these devices deeply challenges our sensibilities.

An undoubted strength of all these papers is the way in which they situate smartphones in their contexts of use, by deploying a variety of innovative approaches to data collection. Nearly all depend on video recording, sometimes combining two points of view with smartphone screen capture. In some of the studies these methods are complimented by student interviews and observational notes. Gilje uses media diaries and 'screenographies' as a way of looking at different kinds of screen use, whereas Paakkari et al. use a video-facilitated interview technique to include participants' perspectives on their own practices. In this sense, all these researchers are looking for approaches that are appropriate to a new context and an emerging field of research and they should be applauded for that.

This task of course also involves adapting existing frameworks such as conversational analysis (Rusk), interactional analysis (Gilje) and visual ethnography (Stahl & Kaihovirta) – and we desperately need empirical work like this, work that is based on authentic uses, rather than popular belief, if only to add texture and depth to the discussion of the fundamentally important educational debates alluded to above. Qualitative work with an ethnographic sensitivity has a key role to play in this respect. These classroom studies are conducted with an ethnographic gaze, motivated by a desire to gain an insider view of students' interactions with digital media through smartphones. Occasionally we are given glimpses of how these social, material and semiotic resources variously entangle with the ongoing lives of the participants as young people, complex and mobile across multiple, heterogeneous and hybrid contexts. We do, however, need a deeper analysis to understand the digital lives of our students better, but we also need to translate the more contained findings of small scale research into something that is accessible to educators.

The next challenge then for researchers is to address the needs and concerns of classroom teachers. In Merchant (2012) I described some early educational innovations that involved using smartphones, pointing to some of the possibilities. These included quick, easy and

personalized access to information, hyperconnectivity for learning that extended beyond the classroom, and the emergence of a new sense of space for mobile learning. The work in this special issue adds detail and nuance to this, and shows smartphones at work in schools, often illustrating the flickering of attention as students move seamlessly between formal and non-formal learning. All well and good, but we need to understand and respect teachers' worries and administrators' caution around letting smartphones 'out of the box'. Does the 'fagdager' approach – a temporary armistice in the school-based battle against smartphones described by Gilje – offer the possibility of controlled experimentation? There are other pressing questions too. If schools don't address bullying and shaming on social media who will? And if the subtleties of the hidden work of digital labour aren't named, how will students learn about them? Some commentators are also concerned about equity issues – the haves and the have-nots – not simply in terms of who owns what, although that is important, but also in terms of who does what on which app. Who are the new winners and losers when smartphones come to school or will it be the same old story enacted in new times?

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