Introduction

Digital Youth: Living, Learning and Literacy

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Abstract

In the age of digital media, to understand ‘digital youth’ becomes a task of growing importance for academics and educators. This current issue of *Beijing International Review of Education* (BIRE) brings together contributions from a group of international scholars to discuss the usage of mobile phones, computers, iPads and the Internet among young people in their daily life, which suggests possible directions to improve education for the younger generation. Based on a review of relevant literature and collected papers of the special issue, this introduction shares some of our responses to the questions referring to the digital changes of young people’s identities, cultures, lifestyles, learning patterns, ways of socialisation and public engagement. It argues that future education innovation must pay attention to a spatiotemporal and sociocultural complexity of young people’s living, learning and literacy in the digital age, which needs a new philosophy of education for the digital youth.

Keywords

digital generation – digital citizenship – digital media literacy – education for digital citizenship

With the rapid development of the Internet in many countries, digital media have indefinitely permeated the everyday life of adolescents in terms of time and place, in particular through the popularization of smartphones. By the use of digital media, diverse virtual and social-networked communities are created, which have significantly changed and challenged young people's identities, cultures, lifestyles including entertainment and consumption, learning patterns, ways of socialisation, political participation and community involvement (Common Sense Media, 2015; Albert, et al. & Shell, 2015; 2019; CNNIC, 2015; 2020). In such a digital age, to understand digital youth becomes a task of growing importance for academics and educators. This current issue of *Beijing International Review of Education* (BIRE) brings together contributions from a group of international scholars to discuss the usage of mobile phones, computers, iPad and the Internet among young people, which suggests possible directions to improve education for the younger generation.

It is a great pleasure for us to serve as the guest editors of this special issue on "Digital Youth: Living, Learning and Literacy" of BIRE. We are deeply grateful to Editors-in-chief, Professor ZHU Xudong, Professor Michael A. PETERS, Professor Tina BESLEY and Associate Professor ZHANG Huajun for their strong support. At the very beginning of planning the special issue, we had already got a lot of encouragement from our colleagues and a certain decision made by the BIRE editorial board, saying that "It's cool. Just do it!" As educational researchers, we do think it is worthwhile to create an opportunity for discussion so that colleagues collaboratively respond to the challenge of digitally-changing childhood and youthhood (Postman, 1994). In fact, both of us (Dr. Ke Lin & Professor Boris Zizek) have paid attention to such a research field for years. Ke started exploring digital citizenship and online civic participation of young people from her PhD journey at University College London (UCL) in the UK and she has recently integrated her research interest of digital citizenship education with media literacy education since she works at Beijing Normal University (BNU) in China. Boris has undertaken a set of studies on the digital socialisation of adolescents and youth-oriented websites as an interactive online social space for young people, when he successively works at Harvard University in the USA and Leibniz University Hannover in Germany. Coincidentally, the theme of digital youth was proposed and widely discussed at two international academic conferences in 2019, in which we both participated. One was "Digital Youth –Growing up in a Novel Social Space", the International Conference held on June 12–14 at Leibniz University of Hannover, Germany, which was mainly organised by Boris and his team. The other was "Morality and Ethics for the Digital World", the 45th Annual Conference held by the Association for Moral Education (AME), on November 7–9 in Seattle,

Washington, USA. At the conferences, we met many excellent colleagues sharing the same interest and doing cutting-edge research. Then we invited some of them to publish their studies on this special issue, in order to further discuss the following topics: (1) How is the digital culture formed and spread among children and young people? (2) What does it mean to be “literate” in the age of digital media? (3) What is good education for advancing digital, media or information literacy? (4) How do digital technologies change student learning and classroom teaching? (5) How does digital media transform the notions of human being and human society?

This article, as an introduction, shares some of our responses to the relevant questions. It firstly reviews a body of significant literature, then highlights the main findings and arguments presented in the papers of this special issue. Studies under the disciplines of humanities and social sciences constitute our focus, such as educational, psychological, sociological and linguistic research. Although most of the studies are written in English, they have provided diverse theoretical perspectives and empirical data generated in different social and cultural contexts, as our authors are based in different countries including Germany, USA, Australia, Canada, Vietnam and China. Finally, the paper introduces a set of potential research topics and cooperation opportunities in future.

1 Understanding Youth: Digital Natives, Digital Learners and Digital Citizens

One of the key questions being asked in recent decades is what makes the current young generation different from those who passed before. While answers vary, all responses tend to include a reference to the presence of the Internet along with digital media which has become embedded in everyday lives. To understand the young people who grow up surrounded by digital media and connected to the Internet, researchers have particularly proposed numerous generation names, such as ‘the Net Generation (N-Gen)’ (Tapscott, 1998, 2009), ‘smart mobs’ (Rheingold, 2002), ‘cyberkids’ (Holloway & Valentine, 2003), ‘digital natives’ (Prensky, 2001; Palfrey & Gasser, 2008), ‘the digital generation’ (Buckingham & Willett, 2006), ‘the App generation’ (Gardner & Davis, 2013) and ‘digital citizens’ (Ohler, 2010; Couldry et al., 2014; Wells, 2015). A widely observed phenomenon is that young people becoming ‘hooked’ by interactive social media, through which they have expanded opportunities of sociability, learning, play, self-expression, communication and building relationships with the society at local, national and global levels (Ito et al., 2010). Young people

have also taken part in the process of constructing a transformed public sphere, which requires the development of new literacy in support of their digital being, digital learning and digital citizenship (Bennett et al., 2010; McLeod et al., 2010). The number of studies in this field has been so tremendous that we can only mention remarkable ones to 'sketch' a portrait of the digital youth.

Early in 1998, Tapscott set out to understand what this younger generation do with their digital expertise. He predicted that the N-Gen could do almost everything in the virtual world, which is happening nowadays.

They manage their personal finances; organise protest movements; check facts to prove a teacher wrong; discuss zits; check the scores of their favourite team and chat online with its superstars; organise to save the rain forest; make C-friends (cyber friends)...cast votes; learn more about the illness of their little sister; go to a virtual birthday party; get video clips from a soon-to-be-released movie (p. 5).

Tapscott (1998) made an optimistic comment that young people feel more comfortable and confident as they staying in cyberspace and travelling between offline and online settings. They were less 'passive' audiences than their parents who grew up with television, although some of young people confronted disappointing issues like "the digital divide" (p. 255–265) and "contradictions between generations" (p. 295–299). Eleven years later when many of the earliest N-Gen themselves have become parents facing new challenges, Tapscott (2009) still believed that the future leadership would be handed over to the younger N-Gen, as he highlighted the role of social-networked citizens in changing democracy.

Inspired by Tapscott's early exploratory framework built with the N-Gen in the USA and Canada, Rheingold (2002) paid attention to the N-Gen in Tokyo, Helsinki and Manila where he saw teenagers on the street "staring at their mobile phones instead of talking" (p. xi) and "twiddling the keyboards with their thumbs" (p. xiii). He defined this group as 'smart mobs' who are the users of mobile technologies, being always online and able to connect with each other. Rheingold believed that an intergenerational power shift and an expansive social coordination were happening as individuals were empowered by ubiquitous mobile networks in which they could get a wider range of information and peer support. Examples manifested a new form of social power leading by smart mobs, which include their collective actions of building online commercial communities, launching street protests, and organising political demonstrations by forwarding text messages. However, Rheingold reminded that the smart mobs were not always 'smart' because they expose themselves to "threats

to liberty”, “threats to the quality of life” and “threats to human dignity” (p. 185). In fact, we have witnessed or heard of many real threats triggered by social media, such as cyber-bullying, cyber-violence, privacy invasion, social riots, and even civil wars in some countries. To avoid these risks, Rheingold suggested that smart mobs have to learn more intelligent, efficient and responsible ways of cooperation.

Based in the UK, Holloway and Valentine (2003) explored the way children applied Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in transforming their activities at school and at home, which contributed to bridging digital divides, eliminating social exclusion, improving children’s information literacy and social competence, as well as connecting school and home, children and adults, and online and offline worlds. Meanwhile, they criticised the research tendency that “cyber-enthusiasts overstated the role of technologies” (p. 159), so they called for more understandings on children’s experience in constructing their social community and creating a more participatory and inclusive learning culture. These statements have provided social and cultural perspectives to update ICT education policy and to develop interdisciplinary ways of learning for ‘cyberkids’.

Buckingham and Willett (2006) invited researchers from different countries to broadly reflect upon youth digital culture referring to four aspects: (1) playing and learning from digital games, (2) communication for family and civic life, (3) online identities and communities, and (4) mediated learning and education. Their book related all these issues into “*media literacy*” and reminded readers about the limited role of digital media in making the coming generation into a source of promise or threat. The key point of the studies was to probe into how the younger generation understand and use the new media and how educational intervention could improve youth media literacy and benefit the society (pp. 11–12). Keeping in similar interests, Buckingham (2008) and his colleagues further explored youth identities as technological navigators, consumers, learners, family and community members, and participatory citizens. Among them, youth identity as ‘digital citizens’ has been emphasised and regarded as media-literate and well-educated people who are able to use digital media safely, effectively and responsibly, making a positive contribution to the society, and they normally acquire new forms competence within virtual cultural groups and civic organizations (Loader, Vromen, & Xenos, 2014; Allen & Light, 2015; Jenkins, Ito, & Boyd, 2015; Wells, 2015). These studies opened up educational and cultural perspectives to understand peer-to-peer learning, socialisation and community involvement of the digital generation.

There are controversial impressions on the digital youth. In a positive light, Palfrey and Gasser (2008) demonstrated that young people named as ‘digital

natives' have adapted to 'live' online. Young people are good at using digital media to maintain relationships, to gain knowledge and to do creative work, and adapting future markets, industries, education and global politics. However, Bauerlein (2008) criticised the digital natives as 'the dumbest generation' for their overdependence on the Internet and their deficit of rationality and responsibility. Evidence for this argument includes the lack of digesting knowledge and limited independent thinking, Attention Deficit Disorder, Internet addiction, the loss of social skills, contracting physical ill-health, online violence and bullying. Admitting the dilemmas of digital being, Tapscott (2009) still deemed that the narrative of "the dark side" resulted from fear of the unknown and a misunderstanding of the digital generation (pp. 304–306). Therefore, he insisted that we should leave aside prejudices and learn from N-Gen for growing up digital and changing the world together.

Besides, numerous studies are dealing with the far-reaching dangers of data misuse (Hancourt 2015, Kucklick 2016, Welzer 2017) and the manifold effects of criminal and social attacks (Weinstein & Selman 2014; Mau 2017). These aspects are also dominant in current youth studies, so that adolescents are asked about their respective awareness of such problems (Shell Studie 2015). These investigations of the digital space are undoubtedly an important critical discussion, but they remain too focused on the manifest, more superficial appearances. These include positions that assume that in the course of the comprehensive establishment of digital media in the everyday life of adolescents, essentially everything has remained the same (Boyd 2014). Accordingly, only security standards would have to be improved. The security measures announced by Facebook in the Messenger Kids App are an example of this. The potential socially profound effects of digital communication need to be further discussed.

To respond to the disputes, scholars have paid increasing attention to education, literacy and learning through public participation. Livingstone (2009) categorised and dissected both opportunities and risks of children's internet use. She suggested overcoming the 'dark side' through developing educational policy, media regulation, parenting, and schooling interventions. Similar educational stances can be found in Rheingold (2012)'s updated work, providing five fundamental points of guidance for young people to become digitally literate, including attention control, participation, collaboration, critical consumption of information and mindful networking. Langmia, Tyree, O'Brien, and Sturgis (2014) applied social media in the classroom for teaching practices and demonstrated that the social-media-based critical pedagogy successfully has developed students' professional skillsets in journalism, public relations, integrated marketing, and other communications fields. Moreover, Ito et al. (2010, 2013)

examined a broader media ecosphere where children build relationships with others and with society, experiencing both isolation and socialisation processes due to networked environments. Their studies further explored how youth networks bridge the divide between in-school and out-of-school learning, finding that online affinity networks are creating new spaces of collaborative learning, shaping new media literacies, cultivating networked public sphere, constructing intergenerational learning institutions, and promoting connected learning that links young people's everyday online practices with their academic achievement, career success and civic engagement (Ito et al., 2013; Ito et al., 2018). They also propose a set of concrete suggestions for making learning opportunities available to more young people, at school and at home. From the above, it can be seen that the research interest into the digital youth has covered three main aspects so far, including *what the digital youth look like*, *what we can learn from them* and *what we should do in support of them*.

2 Our Focus of Being Digitally Competent: Living, Learning and Literacy

As the digital world evolving rapidly, young people along with their parents, teachers and instructors are all facing dramatically increasing challenges. Despite a rich body of discussions on digital youth provided by existing literature, it is necessary to conduct growing and sustaining research in response to updated challenges for young people in various situations. Hence, the current special issue brings together essential empirical and theoretical contributions that identify and critically reflect on the changes that the digital age brings to the act of growing up in the social, cultural, political and educational dimensions of the lifeworld. Throughout fourteen chapters, our authors together focus on a potential that young people will smartly thrive in the networked world (Rheingold, 2012), being digitally competent in the face of multiple challenges, which requires young people to be equipped with technical knowledge, cognitive skills, and sociocultural knowledge including moral, ethical and civic awareness (Calvani, Fini, Ranieri, & Picci, 2012). Yet, each chapter discusses the topic in different ways.

In the first chapter of Editorial, two chief editors, Professor Peters and Professor Zhu have proposed a pair of philosophical concepts "Being Digital" and "Digital Being". The former describes an indisputable fact that the young generation have been living in a digital society since the 1980s as the development of digital technologies and devices, which greatly change the meaning of human being from an epistemological view that refers to "our cybernetic subjectivities

and personalities in cellular networks” (p. 308). The latter proposes a more profound question that to what extent the evolving digital media would change the nature of human being and human society, especially since the year of 2020 when the world has witnessed people surviving, communicating, consuming, teaching and learning in multiple dimensions of online communities while decreasing physical social interaction during the outbreak COVID-19. As the young generation create a ‘Parallel Universe’ or a ‘Brave New World’ in the digital space, it would make an ontological change for the human being in future. Perhaps, digital media not just facilitate ‘the extensions of man’ (McLuhan, 1964), but generate the new essence of man, which might need a methodological guide to nurture more intellectual, healthy and happy Digital Being.

The following paper written by Professor Zizek provides a very interesting start point for the readers of the issue, because it explores young people’s everyday interactions through digital texting, a silent and asynchronous form of communication with rich meanings, which happens to our children, students and ourselves. It focuses on the socialising tendencies of German young people who use digital media such as ‘WhatsApp Chatroom’ and ‘A Thin Line’. A perspective of Reconstructive Socialisation Theory and a methodological approach of Objective Hermeneutics have been applied to explain examples of adolescent experience, attitudes and social development cultivated by the structure of the digital media. The study shows that an intimate interaction can over spatial and temporal social boundaries, however, it hardly substitutes for the sustaining social and public cultures.

The fourth and the fifth articles report two empirical research projects conducted by the team of Professor Robert L. Selman. Colleagues from Harvard University, the University of Minnesota and the University of Calgary have made remarkable contributions. The one refers to an extremely hot issue about whether students should be allowed to use digital devices like iPad in the classroom, and considers how teachers would change pedagogical approaches to accept and adapt new forms of collaborative teaching and learning. Nowadays, these might be world-wide puzzles for school administrators and teachers. The authors expect students’ voices to be heard, so they analysed 400 American students’ essays about student attitudes and opinions towards using and misusing iPads in the classrooms of 4th and 8th grades. The other paper presents a cross-media and cross-cultural case study on the popular fictional story *Wonder*, especially focuses on the humanizing impact of story-telling that helps young readers (students) to deeply understand the related topics of adolescent relational needs, social exclusion and school bullying. The study analyses multiple media texts, including plots in books, scripts of films and reviewers’ comments on social media (e.g. Douban for Chinese reviews and Common Sense

Media for English reviews). It also undertakes a cultural comparison between Chinese-speaking reviewers and English-speaking reviewers, addressing an educational potential of story-telling, film-watching and online comment-sharing in promoting youth socialisation and intercultural understanding. We believe that these research topics and findings will interest a great number of educational scholars and teachers. Therefore, we highly appreciate Pearl Han LI, Shenglan Tan and their co-authors including Terrence Tivnan, Haiqing He, Liu Jiang, Xu Zhao and Robert L. Selman.

The sixth article reminds us a significant psychosocial phenomenon in the process of youth digitisation, which is “digital shame” caused by the downside of self-presentation, comparison with others, and point-scoring when adolescence surfing in the virtual community. Professor Vera King conducted two studies on the relation between online and offline self-presentation among young people in Hamburg and Frankfurt in Germany, identifying new kinds of shame conflicts. Professor King argues that the transformation of digital shame not only derives from the inadequacy of the digital self, but also relates to digitally exacerbated social inequality, such as the shame for status, poverty, failure, clothing, looks, poor performance and scores... Thus, it is necessary to help young people to optimize self-presentation, to reflect lifestyle, to regulate digital shame, and to find a right way to digital socialisation and digital wellbeing. This is a promising research field that has already attracted increasing attention.

The next three articles present different investigations into Chinese university students, enriching meanings and forms of learning. Dr. ZENG Shuang and Professor ZHANG Jingjing interviewed 49 undergraduates from two universities in China after surveying 1,485 undergraduates. This interview-based study specifically focuses on how Chinese students as the second language (L2) learners are managing online learning resources in support of their English learning. Based on a sociocultural theoretical framework, the study underlines the importance of ‘English learning context’ that can be provided by culturally-related media products such as television programmes, films and magazines. However, the lack of awareness and ability to manage digital resources may hinder students’ L2 learning. In this sense, the discussion has moved beyond the dispute about ‘digital native’ and ‘digital divide’, transforming into an emphasis on ‘digital curation’ and ‘digital agency’ which could help ‘digital youth’ to become innovative learners.

Dr. FU Jun (at the University of Melbourne) and Dr. LIN Ke (at Beijing Normal University) share a similar research interest in digital citizenship and respectively contribute papers with each other echoed. Both of them investigated Chinese young people’s everyday civic engagement via social media, not only observing and analysing young people’s online expressions and activities

related to social, cultural and political issues, but also listening to and explaining their attitudes and opinions that explain their online behaviours. Their two studies have recognised a common tendency that the young generation is shaping new identities and citizenships through online and networked civic participation, although the studies employed different methodologies, collecting data from multiple fields of social media, selecting sample groups from diverse regions, ages and educational and cultural backgrounds, and applying various theories to interpret empirical data. They have argued that everyday online experience holds a potential to promote youth civic learning and to nurture different kinds of citizenship, such as informed, confident, actualising, dutiful, responsible and reflective citizens, but the technological power should not be overstated. Instead, the social and cultural elements of literacies significantly account for good practice of citizenship in both online and offline communities. When it comes to digital literacy, it no longer just means digital proficiency that people effectively use digital tools and well adapt to digital living circumstances. In other words, those classical and profound humanistic, moral, ethical and democratic values need to be considered in re-defining 'digital literacy' and in the design of civic learning programmes for the younger generation. The two studies also provide educational and pedagogical recommendations for relevant research in future.

Besides long articles introduced as above, readers of this special issue may also find two short articles very interesting which are edited by Professor Jun Li in the section of China Watch. Dr. LIU Tian and Dr. HUANG Ying respond to the most recent educational challenges just happening in 2020, which is the unexpected massive online education in terms of a world-wide school/university closure due to the outbreak of COVID-19. The paper focuses on strategies of online education employed by China's Higher Education System, meanwhile, introducing some experience in North America. It also proposes some concerns including the unequal access to Internet and digital media, overwhelming and overloaded teaching and learning, and the lack of academic integrity. For online curriculum designers and teachers, it is worthwhile to consider their suggestions to improve future online teaching. Dr. LI Jian also introduces a new hot topic to be discussed, which is "Xin Gao Kao Policy" in China. Her research focuses on the value orientation of China's New College Entrance Examination and analyses how the primary national values of fairness and justice should be integrated in the regional practice of education and examination.

In addition, there are two book reviews written by our postgraduate students at BNU. Ms. XU Shiyu, a Chinese student as a L2 learner, reviews *The Race between Education and Technology* (by Claudia Goldin and Lawrence F. Katz); while Mr. LE Ngoc Toan, an overseas student from Vietnam, reviews *Media*

Literacy in Schools, Practice, Production and Progression (by Andrew Burn and James Durran). Both reviewers, as the members of digital youth, reflect the relationship between digital technology and education reform and share us with their understandings to these remarkable books from a student-centred perspective.

3 Summary

In summary, articles collected in this special issue remind us that young people are constructing multiple identities in online and offline spaces; making both synchronous and asynchronous communications; connecting with peer groups, social counterparts, families, schools and universities, as well as with the wider society; and creating new stories, narratives and communities by the use of digital media. This implies that we, as educators must have new understandings to the digital youth so that we can help them to improve the quality of living, learning and literacy in such a digital age.

Acknowledgement

In the end, we are deeply grateful to all members of BIRE editorial team for their kind help. We would like to thank Mr. Dick Kraaij, the Team Leader Central Desk Editing Journals in Brill, who have sincerely helped all authors in editing and proof-reading articles. Also, we would like to thank Dr. LIU Jing, Ms WANG Hejia and Mr. TIAN Shuo, who work as international officials of Faculty of Education, Beijing Normal University (BNU-FOE), always being committed to promoting cooperation between BNU-FOE and overseas institutes.

This special issue can be recognised as one of progressive outcomes of the international collaboration between Beijing Normal University (BNU) in China and Leibniz University Hannover (LUH) in Germany. Some colleagues at both universities have offered a lot of support to this publication, including Professor Steffi Robak, Dean of Institute of Vocational Education and Adult Education, Dr. CAI Lin, Director of Leibniz Confucius Institute of Hannover at LUH, and Professor SUN Jin, Dr. BAI bin and Dr. JU Xi at BNU. We do hope to get further cooperation and invite more international scholars to explore digital youth culture and education for digital citizenship. There is a pity that we have lost an outstanding scholar, Professor Fritz Oser at the University of Fribourg (Switzerland), who should have published his paper "Virtual Friendship and Virtual Loneliness: Two fragile mindsets of 14 year-old adolescents" on this issue. This is a vital important topic in such a 'lonely' digital world that online

friendship is easy to expanding while offline friendship is fading. He once submitted an excellent abstract to us, however, he has not finished the full paper, as he recently passed away. We must mention his name and potential contribution here in memory of him.

Finally, we wish to thank again all people who have contributed to this issue, the authors, the editors, as well as the reviewers.

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