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The relevance and educational value of social networking sites for classroom literacy learning: a discussion based on empirical work with Norwegian students and teachers

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Abstract

Web 2.0 allows young people to engage in new kinds of online participation, e.g. on social networking sites. When young people produce digital texts to communicate with their friends or connect with them, they engage and integrate their literacy in their everyday lives. Social networking sites are thus examples of how digital media open up spaces where literacy becomes part of young people's social and cultural practices in new and unprecedented ways. Is this development relevant to school-based literacy learning? If so, how should it be met in the classroom?

In the paper these questions are addressed against the backdrop of empirical work with Norwegian students and teachers. This material particularly reveals how students and teachers experience the relationship between *educational* and *commercial* aspects of young people's cultural and social lives online. The analyses of the empirical material draw on work contained in *New Literacy Studies and Media Education Research*.

In the discussion section it is argued that the relationship between the *educational* and *commercial* aspects of young people's use of social networking sites must be more closely examined in the light of how these activities actually relate to literacy learning in the classroom.

Keywords: classroom, commercial, Internet, literacy, social networking sites

Introduction

In recent years Internet access has become a natural part of Norwegian households, while at the same time the media landscape has been characterized, technologically and culturally, by “convergence” (Jenkins, 2006). In practice, this has made the Internet accessible anywhere and at all times for most young people in Norway, while at the same time online communication has undergone a development often described as “Web 2.0.”(O’Reilly, 2005).

Web 2.0 allows young people to engage in new kinds of online participation, e.g. on social networking sites. Social networking sites make young people’s literacy, their textual production, relevant to life realms where it normally has been absent or of minor importance.

Young people’s literacy practices in and out of school are researched in work contained in “New Literacy Studies” and Media Education Research. Most researchers in these research fields have a progressive or liberal standpoint in regard to educational policy. Participation is often put forward as the ideal and desirable effect of young people’s activities online because participation is considered a counterweight to social inequity in school and in society. When studying digital media, these researchers are therefore looking for ways in which the use of new digital media can enforce equity and participation among young people (see e.g. Gee, 2003, 2004; Jenkins et al., 2006). In general, these intentions and presumptions are shared by influential policymakers and researchers in the field of media education in Norway. The national curriculum defines “use of digital tools” as “a basic skill” (Kunnskapsløftet, 2006) and school programs and research projects aim to stimulate social equalization through the possibilities of enhanced participation offered by new digital technologies (see e.g. Bratvold & Kyrkjebø, 2009; Østerud, 2009; Østerud et al., 2006).

Nevertheless, young people’s out-of-school use of the Internet has complex social and cultural prerequisites. This makes it difficult to relate their out-of-school textual production to classroom literacy and even more so to relate out-of-school digital literacy to the weakening or fortification of young people’s digital literacy in institutional learning contexts. It is important to take into account the *commercial* aspects of young people’s online literacy when addressing this problem area (Skaar, 2009a). Considering the strong tradition for exploring power relations (e.g. between teachers and students, boys and girls, minorities and majorities) within educational studies, the lack of exploration of how commercial interests become part of young people’s cultural and social lives online is quite astounding. These commercial influences are highly relevant when power relations on the Internet are explored in a

perspective of educational policy and pedagogy and therefore deserve more attention, nationally or internationally.

Digital media have redefined the boundaries between young people's consumption and production and also between their social lives in and out of school. These changes have allowed marketing to pervade young people's lives in unprecedented ways and thereby altered the power relations between young people, marketers and teachers/school authorities. When young people engage on social networking sites, they also engage with new marketing strategies. *How does this relate to the possible pedagogical relevance of social network use in schools?* In order to assess how young people's use of social networking sites relates to literacy learning in the classroom it is essential to clarify the relationship between the *educational* and *commercial* aspects of these practices. In this paper, results from empirical work with Norwegian students and teachers are presented to inform a discussion with particular focus on this relationship.

Theory

Defining literacy

The appellation "new" in New Literacy Studies (NLS) can be seen as expressing a shift from an *autonomous* to an *ideological* perspective on what literacy actually is. The dichotomy was introduced by Street (1984). As an anthropologist, Street positioned the ideological perspective on literacy in contrast to the autonomous perspective he found in Goody & Watt (1963), Goody (1977; 1986) and Olson (1977). In Street's view, reading and writing always reflect ideology. When the ideological perspective is taken into consideration, it is impossible to isolate reading and writing from power relations in the community.

At the same time, the "new" in New Literacy Studies also has an ontological meaning, since technological development has simultaneously changed the meaning of literacy through the emergence of new communication technologies and media (Collins & Blot, 2003; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). Digital media has contributed to a growing need to redefine the literacy concept, since reading and writing in the traditional sense represent a narrowing in relation to today's possibilities of communication through digital channels (Tyner, 1998; Selfé, 1999), to a medial development from "page to screen" (Snyder, 1997).

Whether the material or social aspects of textual practices is brought to focus, the main point made by NLS researchers is that literacy cannot be reduced to cognitive aptitudes which the individual is free to employ in any cultural or social context. Literacy is understood as

different practices which acquire their value and meaning through the social, cultural and material conditions under which they are played out. Thus, analysis of literacy as social practice entails an exploration of variations within a given social, cultural and material reality.

Literacy in and out of school

From an educational perspective literacy in and out of school can be related to a problem indicated by Dewey over a hundred years ago:

From the standpoint of the child he observed, the great waste in school comes from his inability to utilize the experiences he gets outside of the school in any complete and free way within the school itself; while on the other hand, he is unable to apply in daily life what he is learning in school. (Dewey 1899/1998: 76-78)

This quotation comes from “School’s out – bridging out-of-school literacies with classroom practice” (2002:2), an anthology in which Hull & Schultz have collected a number of articles showing that Dewey’s identification of the mismatch between students’ knowledge and experience *in* and *outside* the school still holds good. Hull and Schultz believe “bridging out-of-school literacies with classroom practice” will contribute to “the fulfilment of the promise of equity through education”, but at the same time they acknowledge that “it must be more complicated than that” (2002:53). Moss (2001) explains why this is so by using Basil Bernstein’s distinction between vertical and horizontal discourse (Bernstein, 1999). In her view the celebration of variety in local literacy practices among different students and populations should not undermine the exploration of the features of schooled literacy which set it apart from other forms of literacy. Moss draws out the contrast between “the hierarchical and vertical sequencing of instruction in school (...) and the relative free-for-all in relation to media texts at home” (Moss, 2001:151). In this critique of NLS Moss stresses that out-of-school literacies must necessarily be transferred to something else in order to become part of schooled literacy. It is therefore inadvisable to try to replace schooled literacy with out-of-school literacy in order to fulfil “the promise of equity through education”.

Contrarily to this, Hull and Schultz (2002:27) still see a rich potential for change of literacy *in school* through research on *out-of-school* literacy, e.g. in “Locating the semiotic power of multimodality”. Hull and Nelson (2005) describe how young people from backgrounds poor in resources find an outlet for their creativity and an opportunity to define their own identity through the production of multimodal narrative. Hull and Nelson are in

accordance with Willis (1990, 2003), who points out that even though popular culture and commercial products are aimed at youth as (passive) consumers, they also enable these young people to use popular culture in unintended ways. Popular culture can thus nurture a creative process in which young people explore their own identity. Hull and Nelson maintain that new media can bolster their opportunities to enter into this creative process (see also Dyson, 2003; Duff, 2004).

Starting from a common wish for equity through education, all the above-mentioned researchers contribute to a “critical discourse” (Drotner, 2008:12) on literacy *in* and *out of* school. But although Street’s (1984) ideological literacy model opens for a critical stance on the power and ideology of literacy both *in* and *out of* school, the *commercial* aspects of young people’s use of digital media have gained more attention within Cultural Studies and Media Education Studies than within NLS (see e.g. Buckingham, 2007a, 2007b, 2009; Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 2003; Fabos, 2008; Willis 1990, 2003).

Commercial aspects of young people’s literacy

Through their use of social networking sites young people become part of online marketing strategies. Today, traditional advertising on television or in the printed media is evermore frequently supplemented with, or replaced by, such strategies. Textual exchange on social network sites happens in ‘the space of flows and timeless time’ (Castells, 2009: 3). This breakdown of spatial and temporal organization is blurring the boundaries between global and local communication, and changing the ways in which Internet users engage with texts. Through various forms of ‘mass self-communication’ (Castells, 2009: 55) on social networking sites the distinction between textual consumption and textual production is dissolving. In the process, the line between commercial and non-commercial texts has also become more difficult to draw: marketers are increasingly taking advantage of forms of participatory, ‘peer-to-peer’ communication, such as blogging, file-sharing and social networking, to get their messages across.

As new promotional techniques are developed using the interactivity of new forms of “social software”, young people are increasingly exposed to marketing in their more or less mundane social interactions with peers online (see e.g. Buckingham, 2007a, 2009; Buckingham et al., 2009; Fielder, Gardner, Nairn & Pitt, 2007; Nairn & Dew, 2007; Skaar, 2008, 2009a, 2009b, Willett, 2008).

While marketers claim that people’s increased exposure to advertising in media represents a form of liberation or empowerment (see e.g. Lindstrom & Seybold, 2003),

policymakers are more inclined to express concern about its potentially harmful effects on their wellbeing.

In addressing the implications of these developments for educational practices, I shall first present a summary of my investigation of a group of 7th grade students' use of a social networking site followed by the results from a study of how teachers view and experience young people's exposure to marketing in digital media. This empirical work informs the subsequent discussion of the question raised in the introduction to this paper.

Empirical work

Students' use of a social network site

In the article "Literacy on a social networking site" I investigated a group of 7th graders' use of the commercial website "Piczo", exploring how it was related to their literacy learning in school (Skaar, 2008). Piczo was launched in 2004. It is primarily used by teens and preteens. The largest Piczo user group is girls under the age of 18. According to its own figures, Piczo had 10.2 million unique visitors in August 2006, and was the most popular social networking site in Canada this year. In 2007 Piczo presented itself on the net like this: "Piczo allows its users to create fully customizable personal websites that do not require any understanding of html code. Users share their life stories with friends by designing their sites with multiple pages featuring photos, graphics, guest books, comment boards, music, and more." Social networking sites generate income for the owners through promotion and advertisement. In 2005 Piczo was the fastest growing online brand in the UK (9669 per cent growth).

Marketing was singled out as a feature which clearly distinguishes the students' Piczo literacy from the literacy they engage in at school. The study thereby substantiates why marketers' influence on young people's literacy should be considered when digital media's potential for bridging in and out-of-school literacy is explored or debated.

In a subsequent article, "Branded selves - How children in Norway relate to marketing on a social network site" (Skaar, 2009b), the students' social and textual practice on Piczo is related to a debate which more generally addresses the role of digital media in today's commercialization of young people's lives. On the Piczo website marketing strategies essentially give young people a more productive role than they have as consumers of more traditional media. Commercial influence is substantiated as the students' branding of themselves through their use of branded resources. Basically the Piczo website renders possible a more extensive branding of self-presentation than self-presentation in face-to-face

interaction. Firstly, Piczo brands the space by branding the social situation where self-presentation is played out. Secondly, Piczo, and other commercial providers as well, brand the texts and tools they offer for the production of self-presentations. The students cannot avoid merging these branded resources with their own writing and design, in ways which make it difficult to tell the one from the other.

In the study, these production conditions are related to participation in the social life played out through students' use of the website. This participation coincides with a pattern of popularity which is also reflected in the classroom. The earliest Piczo users were also the trend-setting group of students in the class in other contexts. A second group of students became Piczo users some time later. A third group of students found it difficult to gain credence for themselves and their interests in the classroom context. These students did not join the ranks of Piczo users either.

The pupils also used a school-based learning platform called eLogg (see Figure 1). On this site, pupils' networks are predefined by the school community, while Piczo limits itself to offering young people the resources they need to create their own networks (see Hoem & Schwebs 2005; Østerud Schwebs, Nielsen, & Sandvik, 2006). On eLogg, all pupils have equal access to the website because this is channelled through teacher-initiated writing tasks. Pupils' comments about each other must be related to the responses they publish on the website. In many cases this response is teacher-controlled. Nevertheless, these norms are exceeded in a way that allows the social hierarchy described above to manifest itself on eLogg as well as in the classroom and on Piczo pages. However, although it is the most popular pupils who get the most positive responses to their eLogg entries, the social ranking in the class makes itself felt much more strongly on Piczo. On the commercial website branded resources become important means in the pupils' competition for popularity. A comparison of the students' self-presentations on Piczo and on eLogg shows that Piczo encourages social competition among these classroom users more than eLogg. The students are stimulated to compete, on the one hand, through being encouraged to rate how cool other users' web-pages are and on the other through the availability of branded resources allowing them to satisfy the commercially-defined popularity criteria. On eLogg, however, the teachers have laid down rules intended to prevent students from engaging in a social competition where the aim is to be more popular than other students in the class. The goal is that everyone should participate on an equal footing.

Figure 1: eLogg



eLogg: 10th grade pupils' opening page



eLogg background: Nine different options

The Piczo classroom users can be divided into two categories. In the one group there are the elaborators, who through constant practice develop skills enabling them to integrate branded resources in a cleverly executed design. In the other we find the collectors, who do

not engage in this kind of persistent practice and so do not manage either to develop a convincing design. Marketers are professional text producers with control of the means they employ to make their texts appealing to young people on the website. This makes it difficult for both elaborators and collectors to be “cool and funny” in competition with the professional marketers on Piczo. Both collectors and elaborators are ridiculed for their own contributions to their digital designs. Mainly, that is, for their own writing. By contrast, neither collectors nor elaborators are mocked for their use of branded resources. This means that elaborators, by displaying their own creativity more than collectors, also in a sense make themselves more vulnerable. On the other hand their development of stronger design skills also puts them in a better position in their Piczo networks. On the whole, however, it appears less risky to present oneself through a collection of branded resources than to elaborate them in a way that brings out one’s own creativity.

The study establishes no basis for providing a clear answer to the question of whether young people are empowered or manipulated as users of a commercial website like Piczo. Piczo opens up new possibilities for both users and marketers to make their voice heard through the interaction taking place between them. Schau & Gilly (2003:398) focus on the possibilities, not the limitations, in this interaction between marketers and users when they emphasize users’ opportunities through “actively commingling brands and their images in the service of self-presentation.” In my study, however, the limitations also come to light, showing that the young people generally use branded resources to highlight those aspects of themselves that are compatible with a commercialized youth culture they are really not old enough to participate in. Some 11-12 year olds may give the impression of being 14-15, while others are more at the level of 9-10 year olds in terms of maturity and physical appearance. They can happily live with this in many situations in real life, but in the Piczo universe it is “uncool” and hence undervalued. This means that the wealth of branded resources reinforces a pressure to engage in conformity that is constraining, not stretching, in relation to young people’s opportunities for self-presentation.

Both Piczo and the school-based website eLogg appeal to young people’s interest in their own identity development. The students say in interviews that they prefer what Piczo can offer them. Does this preference mean that the presentations the students give of themselves on Piczo are a more genuine expression of who they are than the corresponding presentations on eLogg? Is Piczo, in contrast to eLogg, a place where young people are free to be themselves? The study shows that young people use the resources that professional marketers offer on Piczo to define themselves in relation to a strictly hierarchalized “system of cool”:

Rather than abolishing class, cool has essentially *replaced* class as the central determinant of social prestige. In his book *Nobrow*, John Seabrook claims that the ancient opposition between ‘high-brow’ and ‘low-brow’ taste has been annihilated by the marketplace, so that we now live in a world of uniform ‘no-brow’ commercialism. (Heath & Potter 2006:205)

The influence that marketers exercise over young people’s self-presentations can be linked to the branding of the resources the students are offered on Piczo, resources they can choose or reject in line with other resources they use in their identity work. The study problematizes the freedom this affords them by relating young people’s use of branded resources in their self-presentations to an imbalanced power relationship between young people and marketers on the commercial website.

Teachers’ views

Do teachers think classroom literacy learning fosters a critical awareness of *these commercial interests* involved in young people’s use of digital media such as social network sites? To find out we carried out a survey among teachers of Norwegian language and social education in primary schools in Oslo (Skaar, Buckingham & Tingstad, 2010). 376 teachers completed the survey. Although they were positive about regulation, the teachers also said that they had an important job to do themselves as educators. The teachers thought that children needed to be taught to be critical of advertising and marketing in school. In their opinion, this kind of teaching will strengthen children’s capability to resist manipulation and the pressure to buy. However, they felt that this task would not be easily accomplished, especially when it comes to digital media. Most of the respondents agreed that teachers knew too little about how advertising is directed at children on the Internet, and that personally they knew more about advertising and marketing on TV than on the Internet.

The practices and views indicated in the survey were explored in greater depth by individual and focus group interviews with teachers. In line with the survey results, all the interviewees thought children should be taught to be critical of advertising and marketing in school. They described teaching practices where digital technology played a significant role, although none of them had explicitly addressed marketing on the Internet. This lack of attention is emphasized by the fact that all the teachers were unfamiliar with the examples of recent online marketing strategies that we presented to them (Skaar et al., 2010:15-19). They

immediately experienced this as a problem themselves. One teacher told us that ‘we are addressing traditional, old-fashioned advertisements... and we are obviously falling behind in regard to new media’.

The teachers generally considered regulating children’s access to digital marketing inappropriate, and actually not possible for teachers and schools, because children are mainly exposed to the Internet at home. They argued that parents regulate the home sphere and therefore regulation is a matter for them. However, in parent-teacher meetings the teachers had mostly encountered unwillingness among parents to regulate their children’s Internet use, typically justified by the claim that ‘we trust our children’. Although they were critical of this attitude, when asked about their own practices as parents they did not feel they had a very wide scope for regulation themselves either, and found it quite impossible when their children had reached the age of 13 (and started secondary school).

Ultimately, ‘pulling the plug’ was not considered an option: rather than regulation, instilling ‘values and attitudes’ was the interviewees’ preferred strategy as teachers. However, the teachers felt that they were what they described as ‘fossils’ in this area, and judged the ideal approach to children’s Internet use to be open and humorous rather than condemnatory. At the same time they felt that the Internet made the task of raising children’s awareness in regards to marketing and consumption increasingly difficult:

I think it’s very difficult... we can educate... they can learn to recognize the means and think: OK, here I must be on the alert... but the web pages you have shown us today are playing on the students’ basic social needs, their longing to be liked, and that’s really a huge windmill to come up against... (Skaar et al., 2010:25)

None of the teachers in the first focus group objected when one of them claimed simply that ‘we don’t stand a chance in the war against marketing’. Yet the teachers in the second focus group were equally in agreement when they told us that ‘We *must* believe we are doing an important job in educating children about advertising and marketing’. One of them specified this belief a bit more:

We must work with their social upbringing and at the same time educate them in regards to marketing. None of these projects are in vain. I think what I’m doing in the field of advertising and marketing is worthwhile. I’m sure of that.

(Skaar et al., 2010:25)

These developments thus precipitate a conflict between the feeling of confusion and powerlessness, and the necessity of believing in what one is doing. As such, the digital media landscape and the new marketing strategies that it entails should prompt us to consider how much it is actually reasonable for teachers to expect from themselves in doing this job.

Discussion

The problems

In assessing the educational value of young people's use of social network sites, three problem arenas should be addressed, which I shall briefly outline here as the participation problem, the transference problem and the emulation problem.

Firstly we might ask: don't social networking sites like Piczo allow young people, out of their own motivation and interest, to voluntarily and enthusiastically take roles in "communities of practices" (Lave and Wenger, 1991) and thereby develop precisely the competencies and skills for participation that e.g. Henry Jenkins and his colleagues (2006) consider so crucial in media education for the 21st century? The studies presented above showed that this is not necessarily so (Skaar, 2008; 2009b). The fact that online blogging and social networking, unlike TV viewing, are based on technologies which enable social interaction does not mean that young people entering a social network site all of a sudden become highly collaborative and interested in the common good. A "community of practice" is also sustained by competition between the participants (see Skaar, 2009b:255-56). Although collaborating, the participants are still competing to achieve their personal goals and ambitions within the community. In young people's interaction on the Internet, social competition is strikingly prominent, as it is within popular culture and entertainment at present (see Skaar, 2008:189-190). Reality TV and talent shows are adding competition to social interaction in ways we could hardly imagine a few years ago. If we try to make young people's communities of practice on the Internet relevant to literacy learning in the classroom, we are in effect also introducing exactly the kind of social competition that e.g. the Norwegian national curriculum tells us to avoid in schools. Hence, there is a need to problematize young people's participation in communities of practice as inherently good (see Skaar, 2009b:257).

Secondly, the literacy of social network sites is surely transferable to the classroom. The teacher can simply turn a blind eye to the students' activities on their laptops or classroom computers, or deliberately allow them to enter their social networking pages during

class. Few people are likely to consider this a substantial contribution to the improvement of classroom literacy learning, and researchers have actually questioned whether bringing students' interests to the fore in this way contributes to democracy and equity (Penne, 2006; Ziehe, 2005). Generally speaking, reproducing young people's online textual practices is not enough (see Skaar, 2008:192-198); these practices must be carried *further* in classroom literacy learning (see e.g. Moss, 2001).

Thirdly, on social networking sites like Piczo young people engage in literacy not because someone tells them to but because they themselves want to (see Skaar, 2008:187). If commercial sites and pages are not usable "as they are" in schools, why can't educators simply make their own school-based social network sites and thereby take advantage of the skills and interest young people develop in their online lives out of school? Here we must consider that commercial social network providers only have one aim, namely making young people visit their pages. Educators, on the other hand, have a double aim: to educate students about right and wrong (pass on values and attitudes); and to educate students within specific subjects (pass on knowledge, capabilities and skills). It is in fact the very lack of such aims and intentions that attracts young people to many commercial websites. The young Piczo users in the study simply did not want teachers or parents to intervene in their online activities out of school (see Skaar, 2008: 187). On the contrary, they often wanted to break teachers' and parents' rules and regulations, and the study shows how commercial agents are helping them in this endeavor (see Skaar, 2008: 189-190). For the research ethical dilemmas this created see Skaar, 2009a:46-48).

The opportunities

Although not shying away from the objections outlined above, educators should indeed also further investigate how young people's use of social networking sites out of school can actually add educational value to classroom literacy learning. Basically, the pupils' practices and teachers' views make two assumptions reasonable: firstly, that out-of-school social networking can stimulate students' classroom engagement in *textual production* and secondly, that out-of-school digital textual practices can stimulate students' classroom engagement in *textual criticism*.

In regard to the first assumption: online textual production happens in a space where young people engage in textual production and where textual genres therefore emerge and develop (see Skaar, 2008, 195-198, 2009b:259-261). These texts form part of young people's daily lives, their identity formation and their social interaction. This makes the interest they

invest in developing, transforming and creating these texts “anew” a resource for literacy learning in school (Kress, 1993:174). There are no general rules here, but the higher the threshold for students’ willingness to engage in textual production in school, the more reason for identifying and drawing on students’ textual production out of school, for example their use of social networking sites. From their online practices young people learn to understand how web pages function and to understand the user interface (of web pages). They also learn how to install programs, how to use programs and how to customize them. In addition they become familiar with the rapid change of programs and interfaces, with sharing information with other users and not least with expressing themselves through digital writing and design. Moving from the known, familiar and appreciated to the less known, less familiar and less appreciated is a good pedagogical principle. If the literacy lesson in school departs from young people’s textual production on social networking sites, this might motivate them, as students, to move on to textual genres they would otherwise not take any interest in. But, as stated in the previous section, replication of young people’s out-of-school digital literacy in the classroom setting is not enough, and the true educational challenge is to carry this literacy further, to make it transcend the interests and motivations that initiated it in the first place. This brings us to the second assumption: new forms of textual production raise the need for new forms of textual criticism. On social networking sites young people develop skills which contribute to competences prescribed in the curriculum, but at the same time these textual practices represent a social interaction which schools try to curb. Understanding literacy as social practice implies that you cannot get the one without the other. The fact that young people’s online social activities can actually foster values and behavior directly opposed to the values laid down in the national curriculum points to the need for including new elements in the teaching and learning of textual criticism in the classroom (see Skaar et al., 2010:24-25). The texts young people produce themselves on social networking sites might be a fruitful starting point for helping them to understand the complexity of digital texts. In this sense their social network practices are clearly of relevance and educational value to schools. However, both studies described in the preceding section indicate that when young people themselves participate in marketing online the opportunities they have for exercising criticism they are much more limited than when they have no personal involvement in the production and distribution of the marketing they are exposed to. This raises the question of what the practical consequences are of the participation culture, which the American researcher Henry Jenkins and his colleagues claim is the key to young people’s literacy for the 21st century (Jenkins et al., 2006).

Questioning “the participation culture”

In their white paper report for the MacArthur foundation Henry Jenkins and colleagues (2006) state their intention to move beyond questions of technological access to consideration of “opportunities to participate and develop the cultural competencies and skills needed for full involvement” in the participatory culture. They see this as shifting the focus of new media literacy from individual expression to community involvement and point out the following skills needed for students to become part of it:

Table 1: Jenkins et al. 's skills for participation

Play
Performance
Simulation
Appropriation
Multitasking
Distributed cognition
Collective Intelligence
Judgment
Transmedia Navigation
Networking
Negotiation
(Jenkins et al.,2006:4)

But these skills for “a new participatory culture” are actually not in conflict with the Norwegian national curriculum, which in its introduction points out that the aim of education is to make the student:

Table 2: Norwegian national curriculum skills

a meaning-seeking human being

a creative human being

a participating (working) human being

an educated and cultivated human being

a cooperating human being

an environmentally conscious human being

an integrated human being

(The Norwegian National Curriculum, "Kunnskapsløftet", 2006: 1-22)

The first part of the national curriculum addresses *mass* media: "mass media put young people in a passive onlooker role and at the same time expose them to conflicting ethical principles".

The second part of the national curriculum addresses *digital* media: "Use of digital tools" is "a basic skill" (Kunnskapsløftet, 2006, Skaar et al., 2010:19-20). Anyway, Henry Jenkins and his colleagues' skills for participation can in fact be subordinated to the values already expressed in the introduction to the curriculum:

Table 3: Jenkins et al.'s skills for participation subordinated to the Norwegian nation curriculum

A participating (working) human being

and a creative human being:

Play

Performance

Simulation

Appropriation

A participating (working) human being

and a meaning-seeking human being:

Distributed cognition

Collective Intelligence

An educated and cultivated human being

and an environmentally conscious human being

Judgment

An integrated human being:

Multitasking

Transmedia Navigation

A cooperating human being:

Networking

Negotiation

To Jenkins and colleagues a participatory culture is positive because it assures freedom, equity and democracy for the people. However, even if the Norwegian national curriculum was revised in line with their white paper, explicitly upgrading “participation culture” through use of new digital technologies, there would still be problems with assessing students’ use of social network sites as relevant to the skills identified as essential to media education for the 21st century. The Jenkins and colleagues’ white paper is actually just as idealistic and value-based as the Norwegian curriculum. The difference is that the national curriculum has “basic Christian and humanitarian values” as its starting point, while Henry Jenkins and colleagues start from new possibilities for participation in the digital era. Jenkins and colleagues might or might not endorse Christian values, but their participation doctrine is surely in line with “basic humanitarian values”. In sum, the difficulties entailed in making students’ social networking practices relevant to school-based literacy are not due to curricular shortcomings, but to students’ actual practices on the Internet.

On social websites this practice is controlled by commercial interests basing themselves on students’ short-term interests, that is, their desire for some form or other of immediate reward. Teaching on the other hand has its basis in the students’ long-term interests, that is, their gradual acquisition of the knowledge and skills needed to reach the goals specified in the curriculum. In his comprehensive metastudy Hattie affirms that the teacher is the most important individual factor for students’ learning (Hattie, 2009.238-39). I would argue that this is because the ties between student and teacher permit such a long-term approach. Before we can adopt any position regarding the relevance of young people’s use of social networking sites it is therefore necessary to problematize *how* young people actually participate.

Jenkins claims that “a politics of participation starts from the assumption that we may have greater bargaining power if we form consumption communities.” (Jenkins, 2009:259) The question however is what we are to bargain about. If it is the right to pursue the desire for some form or other of immediate reward in the manner dictated by the market, then Jenkins is right. If on the other hand it is the right to develop qualities, interests and knowledge based on lasting and binding ties of the type described in the curriculum, then the form of bargaining power referred to by Jenkins is of little value.

On the Internet, pedagogical and commercial interests compete on an equal footing, but employ different means. The Internet gives full freedom to anyone wishing to offer young people something, but not to those who wish to limit young people’s access to something. This makes it much easier to stimulate the short-term motivation on which commercial actors base their products than the long-term interests behind the teacher’s classroom teaching. The school is doomed to lose out to commercial interests on an open website because non-school-relevant content will always appear more interesting in a structure promising constant and immediate reward. The teacher may succeed in competing in individual cases, but on the whole it is impossible to achieve success without a strategy designed to ensure that students always have their immediate wishes gratified. No such strategy is open to schools and teachers. Generally speaking, young people’s participation on commercial websites is of strictly limited pedagogical value, while the practice simultaneously has enormous commercial potential.

Students’ participation on social networking sites must be viewed in conjunction with what motivates it. The assumption that the use of the Internet is pedagogically interesting should not be taken for granted, but discussed at all times on the most concrete basis possible. One important question is what role commercial actors should be allowed to play on sites where this participation occurs. On a website like Piczo it is the commercial interests that dominate and thereby structure young people’s participation. On a non-commercial site such as Wikipedia, on the other hand, the basis for participation is in line with the school’s objectives. A student who has learned how he or she can participate through active contributions on a website like Wikipedia has acquired an important form of literacy with substantial transferability. Wikipedia is therefore a good example of how the Internet can bring positive resources and possibilities to a teaching situation. Conversely, young people’s literacy on *commercial* networking sites can be *thematized*, but with difficulty *practiced* in any productive way in the school context.

Those students with the best platform for developing school-relevant literacy are by contrast those who in their activities on the Internet manage to resist being steered by short-term goals or who at least manage to balance them against the long-term goals that are the foundation on which the Norwegian national curriculum is built. Digital literacy for the 21st century thus concerns as much the ability to understand when to choose to remain outside as the ability to say yes to all the commercial offers of participation young people are constantly bombarded with on social networking sites out of school.

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