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Received: 31-05-2013 / Reviewed: 13-07-2013
Accepted: 02-08-2013 / / Preprint: 15-11-2013
Published: 01-01-2014 / RECYT Code: 21880

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.3916/C42-2014-15

Researching on and with Young People: Collaborating and Educating

Investigar con y sobre los jóvenes colaborando y educando

ABSTRACT
This paper reports on collaborative research on and with young people. In this study five groups of students in the final year of their Compulsory Secondary Education (CSE) from five different schools developed five ethnographic studies about how they communicate, express themselves and learn inside and outside school, with the support and collaboration of teachers and members of our research group. The paper begins by discussing the dimensions of collaboration in education, taking into account the contribution of collaborative and cooperative learning, and the potential of digital resources, situating earlier influences and characterizing the work realised. Then there is a description of the research carried out on and with the young people we invited to perform as investigators. The results focus on the description and conceptualization of the different types of collaboration that have emerged while carrying out the ethnographic studies in each of the schools using digital technologies. Finally, we discuss the implications and limitations of the work as a contribution to anyone interested in researching on and with young people, collaborating, educating and using digital resources.

RESUMEN
Este artículo da cuenta de una investigación colaborativa realizada con y sobre los jóvenes. En este trabajo, cinco grupos de estudiantes de cuarto de Educación Secundaria Obligatoria (ESO), de otros tantos centros de Cataluña, han realizado cinco estudios etnográficos de forma colaborativa entre ellos, algunos de sus docentes y miembros de nuestro equipo de investigación, con la finalidad de explorar cómo y con qué los jóvenes se comunican, expresan y aprenden dentro y fuera de las instituciones educativas. Comienza discutiendo las dimensiones de la colaboración en la educación, teniendo en cuenta las aportaciones del aprendizaje colaborativo y cooperativo y las potencialidades de los recursos digitales, y situando los antecedentes y las particularidades del trabajo llevado a cabo. Sigue con la caracterización de cómo y en qué ha consistido la investigación con los jóvenes a los que invitamos a ejercer como investigadores. Los resultados se centran en la descripción y conceptualización de las formas de colaboración a las que ha dado lugar la producción de estos cinco estudios etnográficos en cada uno de los centros utilizando tecnologías digitales. Finalmente, se discuten las implicaciones del trabajo realizado y se señalan sus limitaciones lo que se configura como la principal aportación para quienes se propongan investigar con y sobre los jóvenes colaborando, educando y utilizando recursos digitales.

KEYWORDS / DESCRIPTORES
Digital communication, collaborative learning, training, secondary school, collaboration, cooperation, research, ethnography.
Comunicación digital, aprendizaje colaborativo, formación, educación secundaria, colaboración, cooperación, investigación, etnografía.

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1. State of the question

This article reports on the process and results of one of the stages of the IN-OUT research project in which, five groups of final-year Compulsory Secondary Education (CSE) students from five different schools undertook ethnographic studies to explore how they communicate, express themselves and learn inside and outside the school. The most innovative methodology used has been to invite the students to be researchers of a phenomenon that both concerns and involves them directly and to ask them to do so in collaboration with their teachers and university professors. Moreover, it extends the concept of collaborative learning based on digital technologies beyond the use of a specific platform (Lehtinen & al. 1999). This forms an example of what researching and teaching in collaboration about and with technologies may mean.

1.1. Scope of the collaboration

The interest in collaborative or cooperative learning, often used synonymously, has increased with the rise of digital technologies and competence-based curricula (OECD, 2005; European Communities, 2007; Hmelo-Silver, Chinn, Chan & O'Donnell, 2013). Nevertheless, it is not new in the educational field or in the history of humanity. If we look back over the evolution of civilisations, the line that gives continuity to the human species and the development of individuals and people is the capacity to collaborate, to work with each other in undertaking a task, or the capacity to cooperate, to work together with another person or others for the same ends. In fact, all the technological developments that have involved the ability of the human species to progress have a strong collaborative or cooperative base (Sennett, 2012).

However, the School, in its existence of more than one hundred and fifty years, more than on collaboration and cooperation, has been based on, and above all encouraged, individuality as practiced in large groups, and competitiveness. This occurred despite movements such as the Progressive School (United States) and the New School (Europe), which began to place the focus more on the process than on the result of learning, understanding collaboration not only as a teaching practice but also as a broad strategy to learn together and come together to learn.

Our research is based on this pedagogical notion of collaborative learning and on the proposal of Vygotsky (1929) that there is a dialogical relation between individuals and their environment. From this comes the importance of the notion of the zone of proximal development and of mediation in order to favour thinking skills of a higher order. In this process of development, individuals not only dominate aspects of cultural experience but also habits, cultural forms of behaviour and cultural methods of reasoning. Collaboration between young people and adults can contribute to cognitive, emotional and social growth according to the importance of «the presence or absence of certain types of institutions (for example schools), technologies and semiotic tools (for example ball-point pens and computers)» (Hogan & Tudge, 1999: 41).

There are studies that combine the notions of collaborative learning with the potentialities of digital technologies that focus on the role of interaction, the intervention of teachers in the collaborative space and the collaborative construction of knowledge (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1994; Yang & Wang, 2013). In our case, the existence of virtual environments that encourage collaboration and exchange is of fundamental importance. These settings can be characterised as online digital spaces where we can share information with others (Snowdon, Churchill & Munro, 2001) and work together, acting as organisers in the collaborative work (Guitert, Romeu & Pérez-Mateo, 2007; Sánchez, Forés & Sancho, 2011). They enable an asynchrony in space and time that is very useful, without forgetting that, like all virtual environments, they are only resources and do not guarantee either interaction or collaboration. In fact, to create an atmosphere of collaboration we do not need either digital or virtual tools, although they can help, and the success or failure of this does not usually depend on the tools.

In our research, we did not consider the use of virtual collaborative environments as an objective, but the appropriation of them in as much as they can facilitate or improve collaboration (Sánchez & al., 2011). Therefore, we have not chosen a priori a tool and we have used the digital resources that have best adapted to the needs of each school and the learning process.

1.2. Background to the study

In recent times, the argument has arisen for the need and convenience to include young people in the research processes, going from the notion of researching on young people to researching with young people (Kirby, 2004; Fraser, Lewis, Ding, Kellett & Robinson, 2004; Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, 2009; Hernández, 2011). Along these lines, there are collaborative research and learning projects between institutions and the educational system cycles that, as in our case, understand collaboration as a strategy to learn together and come together to learn, an issue we choose to highlight:

Collaborative research with teachers and secondary school pupils through the «Teaching and Learning Research Programme» (TLRP), carrying out eight interdisciplinary projects in which teachers and researchers collaborated for four years in distinct educational institutions. One of the actions was to undertake research with young people aged between eleven and sixteen starting from relevant questions about their lives (Gillen & Barton, 2010).

Participative research-action between secondary school students and their teachers. From the University of Queensland (Australia), over the last ten years collaborative projects with teachers, students and universities have been encouraged through processes of Participatory Action Research (PAR) (Bland & Atweh, 2007).

Participative research between the university and formal and informal educational institutions, based on visual production. Over recent years, in the South American context, from Art Education, research programs with young people have begun to emerge based on the idea of the young person as visual producer (Edarte, 2013).

1.3. In-Out Project

The RDi IN-OUT project: «Living and learning with new literacies inside and outside secondary school: contributions to reduce abandonment, exclusion and school disaffection of young people» starts from the confirmation that the majority of secondary schools do not seem to be prepared or equipped to face the changes in contemporary society. This reality generates «alienation, apathy, disaffection, boredom and apprehension» (Birbili, 2005: 313). Moreover, the limited impact of digital technologies in these schools (Hernández & Sancho, 2011; Sancho & Alonso, 2012) increases the difference between the experiences of young people inside and outside the institution, shaping two cultures with distinct expectations (King & O'Brien, 2002). Thus the initial hypothesis of this project is that there is a disconnection between what the secondary school considers as learning (mainly listening, doing exercises and reporting in the exam) and how young people learn outside the school in communities of exchange using different literacies. To explore this hypothesis and provide alternatives, we considered studying how young people learn inside and outside school. And we decided to do this with them. In this way, a fundamental stage of the project was to undertake research in five secondary schools in Catalonia. We highlighted the characteristic that the researchers were five groups of students, accompanied by and in collaboration with the research team as well as at least one teacher from each participating school.

> In this process of development, individuals not only dominate aspects of cultural experience but also habits, cultural forms of behaviour and cultural methods of reasoning. Collaboration between young people and adults can contribute to cognitive, emotional and social growth according to the importance of «the presence or absence of certain types of institutions (for example schools), technologies and semiotic tools (for example ball-point pens and computers).

2. Material and methods

When we planned our study, the curriculum for final-year Compulsory Secondary Education (CSE) in Catalonia included the production of a group research project. This project, on which one hour is spent each week, is understood as «a series of activities of discovery by the pupils regarding a subject chosen and marked out, partly by themselves, with the guidance of the teaching staff» (Departament d'Educació, 2010: 251). Thus we agreed with the five participating schools that the students would do it with us and that, as well as being presented publicly in the University of Barcelona (UB), would be evaluated by the school. This decision would contribute to give meaning to the process and to the results of the studies, although as we see in the results section, it was not thus in the five cases. The act of working with and about young people and doing it in an institutional context turned the negotiation with them, their families and the schools into an essential part of the research in order to satisfy the ethical requisites.

The epistemological and methodological positio-

ning of this research that involves secondary schools and students aged fifteen and sixteen for several months of continuous and demanding work led us to speak of an intentional sample (Patton, 2002) characterized by its quality and not its quantity. The participating entities are representative of the different existing socioeconomic groups (table 1). We also particularly emphasised that the groups represented the different groups of students: those that respond to the expectations of the teachers, those that broadly respond and those that do not respond (at least two in each group).

In line with the objectives of the project and the young people's interest, we developed five collaborative ethnographic studies which, although each group could produce its objectives and questions, were focused on the exploration of these questions:

• How and with what do we communicate, express ourselves and learn inside and outside the school?

• What connections, disconnections, complementarities or distances are there between learning inside and outside the school?

In relation to the methods of collecting information, each school team (made up of secondary school students, school teachers and university professors) decided on and learnt the techniques that would enable them to progress in the ethnographic study. In brief, these would consist of: observations and self-observations, field logbooks, audio-visual documentation (photography, video, music, etc.), interviews and group discussion.

Table 1: Participants

Institution	Teaching staff	Students
University of Barcelona	7	5
Virolai School (Barcelona)	1	6
Institute Alfacs (Sant Carles de la Ràpita)	1	11
Mallola Institute (Esplugues de Llobregat)	1	6
Palau Institute (Sant Andreu de la Barca)	2	6
Ribera Baixa Institute (Prat de Llobregat)	2	5
TOTAL	14	39

During the classroom sessions, training in these techniques was combined with research about them, their contexts and resources of communication, expression and learning. Other aspects dealt with were:

• How to analyse the information: identify differences and similarities between communication, expression and learning inside and outside the school.

• How to produce the information: writing up the individual ethnographic stories and the final report with the preparation of the public presentation.

The scope of collaboration of the process, the methodologies and digital resources used are detailed in table 2.

The work with the young people was undertaken between October 2012 and April 2013 except in the Els Alfacs institute which was extended until May, and in all the cases, with weekly meetings of each team and an exchange of information and communication by means of the technological resources chosen by each school. The collaborative research and learning process ended with the public presentation of the five projects in the UB, an event attended by colleagues and families of the students and primary, secondary and university teachers and professors.

3. Analysis and results

In our research, some of the characteristics of the studies reviewed occurred, above all that relating to the leading role of the students, who were placed in the function of researchers and went from reproducing to producing knowledge.

The results of this collaborative research and learning process have been multiple and different. Many of them have provided great satisfaction to all those involved, although they are difficult to express in the context of this article. We refer, for example, to the change of attitudes, the increase in involvement, how the students were authorised each day to speak, discuss, question and how they improved their forms of expression and communication. We also refer to the security and ease with which they all spoke in the auditorium of the Fine Art Faculty of the UB. These results go beyond the analogical and digital documents produced and shared in distinct digital platforms because they have come to form part of the students' background. From the perspective of educational research as a process that educates all the participants, for us this constitutes the most important result.

Table 2. Scope of collaboration and means

Collaborative learning and research	between	• University research team. • University and secondary school teachers. • University teachers and secondary school teachers and students. • Secondary school students from each school. • Secondary school students from five schools.	with	• Methodologies and practices of collaborative work. • Variety of digital resources: ○ Virtual learning environment. ○ E-mail. ○ Services of social networks. ○ Shared and collaborative online documents. ○ Intranet or web and Internet service.

The five ethnographic studies undertaken collaboratively by students and school and university teachers have produced important results regarding the comprehension of how and with what the students communicate, express themselves and learn inside and outside school. However, being coherent with the subject of the monograph, we focus on the forms of collaboration that occurred in the five schools and the technological resources they were provided with.

• Virolai case: from strategic to relational collaboration. We met in the Laboratory, where the young people attended with their laptops or tablets, and we altered the space to favour communication. From the first sessions, we tried to break with the dynamic of the adult who mainly decides and explains. We thus highlight a step forward when we agreed with the students that they interview and film each other explaining their learning and expressive experiences inside and outside the school. In these interviews, the young people gradually gave themselves different roles and made decisions and assumed their authorship.

During the ethnographic research, the most used digital resources were a website and the documents shared online. According to the young people, the use of the website enabled them to monitor the evolution of the research and do their project since the work sessions were ordered chronologically with their corresponding significant information in a single shared space. By way of example, when the young people produced the report of their project they placed, on one of the pages of their website, the titles of the contents linking them to documents shared online. According to them, the shared document facilitated their task of creating knowledge in a group while at the same time, quickly and simply, they always knew where the information was and that it would be updated with the latest entry. According to them, during this process of creation and analysis, they had the experience of knowledge as a social and negotiated construction of collaborative and shared re-elaboration where they mainly interacted through dialogue and questions. When they finished the project, the young people emphasised that they observed and analysed differently and were able to express themselves better in writing.

• Els Alfacs case: towards integrating collaborating. It was agreed with the school's management that the group sessions would be done within the setting of an extracurricular subject. These were held in the Visual Education classroom with several tables arranged for group work. We were faced with the difficulty of breaking with a traditional work dynamic where the adult decides and the young people produce. What enabled a change of course was when, after a few weeks, the young people stopped asking what we wanted them to do, and began to take hold of the reins themselves. At this moment each one of them became involved in a different way and intensity, contributing diverse aspects to the project. For example, when we agreed that they would record a video (speaking about their findings and learning experiences) they thought up the questions, recorded and edited it in with a sense of authorship considering their singularities.

The digital applications we decided to use were a key factor for the collaborative research and learning that we gradually constructed. A closed group in a social network would be used for the internal formal relations that they managed themselves. At the same time, a service of online documents would enable them to organise the findings with great flexibility in sharing and creating files according to needs. The young people ended up contributing textual, auditory, visual and audiovisual resources, maps and digital presentations. They also created another closed group in a social network service to encourage communication and exchange with the groups of the other four schools involved.

• La Mallola case: from occasional to accumulative collaboration. The work undertaken by the young people did not form part of the final-year Compulsory Secondary Education (CSE), but had institutional recognition since it was presented in the school with the attendance of a representative of the council. They decided on their participation in the project on a voluntary basis, but the fact of not forming part of a regulated school activity, although done during class time, put them off initially. The interest aroused in them by the study topic kept them in the group, despite their ambivalence, but meant, initially, that their collaborative research work and learning was focused in the classroom sessions.

After the first meetings, the need to broaden communication and collaboration beyond the confines of the school were considered, in order to share the material produced. The young people were unaware of the service of online collaborative and shared documents, although some of them remembered having used one in the school at one time. In the end they decided to create a closed group in one of the most popular social network services, in order to inform us and share material, one of the students creating it in a

moment on their netbook. From this moment on, the main use of this social network was to remind them of the work they had decided to do, share material (photos, videos, presentations...), see interventions and discuss strategies to improve their participation. The majority of interventions were by the two researchers from the university and three of the youths. As the presentation time approached, the occasional collaboration became accumulative. All the members of the group carried out the assigned tasks (writing texts, producing photos, videos, etc.) to create the report and multimedia presentation that represented their work.

• El Palau case: collaboration, separation, collaboration. The first stage of the collaboration was focused on interviews and observations. The youths divided into two equal groups with assigned roles. The written observations were shared among the whole group to analyse them and try to form conclusions. Two groups were organised from the individual essays and each one constructed, with our support, a table classified by categories. The youths from group A (of curricular diversification) took part less initially, but were more involved in individual tasks. As a result of the collaboration between members of both groups, those in group A ended up taking part more and those from group B undertaking the programmed tasks. In the second stage, the youths produced the project they had to present in the school. On having to do it with the group of their class, they had to be separated. This separation did not help either the development or the production of the report, above all for the youths from group A who presented a project that did not reflect the work done. The third stage consisted of the construction and preparation of the presentation in the UB. The results were satisfactory for all the youths as a result of the consensus between them, organised with our support again in a single group.

To share the information collected and make collaboration easier, after considering different options, it was decided to create a closed group in a social network service in which only them and us participated. This group was basically used as a deposit for what was produced, with occasional interventions from the researchers in the news forum with reminders of the contents of some sessions, documents to include or prepare changes of programme, etc.

• Ribera Baixa case: from sharing to collaborating. As the school had not yet decided how to undertake the final-year Compulsory Secondary Education (CSE) project, we agreed with the youths to meet after school. We had a sandwich together chatting about different things and later focused on the task at hand. This contributed to increasing the mutual trust and recognition. All the work sessions were carried out on school premises, which facilitated group work and equipment, except one which was done in a UB space.

The process reflected the conditions of the context. One of the students only attended one session. He did the work enthusiastically together with his colleagues, but did not return. His presence was very intermittent in the school too. Another took part sporadically, but had an important role in the development of the presentation in the university. These two cases show that collaborative research and learning are not an answer in themselves, despite the interest and the considerable results recognised by the students. The process of research and learning in collaboration went through distinct moments and forms:

• Directed collaboration. The university and school teachers suggested, and the students did. More present in the formation stages.

• Mixed collaboration. The decisions were taken with the active participation of the students who made them collaboratively. For example, search and processing of information of concepts involved in the research, production of final report or preparation of the public presentation.

• Collaboration between peers. The students proposed and took decisions that they carried out inside and outside the school. For example, they decided to make videos about themselves to include in the presentation of their work.

After analysing different options together, they agreed on a file storage service in the cloud to facilitate asynchronous collaboration and by e-mail to exchange day-to-day information. Through this service, those of us involved were able to accede to the information available. In this context, the production of the final report involved, as well as the commitment from the youths, establishing a turn so that each one could present their contributions.

4. Discussion and conclusions

The results of this stage of the research constitute a series of findings in order to base the importance of doing research with young people and not only on young people (Kirby, 2004; Fraser & al., 2004; Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, 2009; Hernández, 2011). Researching on and with young people collaborating and educating, as other studies have partly shown (Gillen & Barton, 2010; Bland

& Atweh, 2007; Edarte, 2013) in our study has involved:

• Converting the educational activity into personally significant and authentic experiences by undertaking research on them and about subjects that concern and interest them. This leads to contextualised and problematized learning (Cobb & Bowers, 1999), since the attainment of new knowledge is not independent from the context of young people and requires questions in order to move forward.

• Taking on intellectual risks that go along unfamiliar paths undertaking activities of description, analysis and creation using different digital devices. This gave rise to diverging and open understandings, not oriented to repetition where the interactive working methods were based on the setting of questions and dialogue which contributed to giving meaning to their process of inquiry (Hernández, 2007; Entwistle, 2009).

• Favouring the production of knowledge and learning not included in the curriculum. Young people as researchers produce, design, analyse and synthesise their research work based on an ethnographic study about their own reality. Learning experiences that help them connect and give meaning to the information (Burke & Jackson, 2007).

• Encouraging a vision of education that goes beyond attaining fragmented information or specific skills, offering opportunities for the creation of a product: the final-year secondary education (ESO) research project. Knowledge here is understood not as something set and immutable, but as a social and negotiated construction between the members of the each group, with collaborative and shared re-elaborations, in line with belonging to a culture of liquid information (Area & Pessoa, 2012).

• Overcoming the physical and organisational limits of the classroom, making the utmost use of different digital resources and tools of collaboration and learning, and assisting the youths to shape their knowledge and their own knowledge spaces.

• Promoting the responsibility of the youths in inviting them to participate in the process of producing knowledge based on investigation, deliberation, consensus and transference as a way of sharing, constructing and developing meanings.

• Considering the learners as biographical and cultural subjects, and not as minds that reproduce information (Hernández, 2004; Burke & Jackson, 2007).

• Bringing young people towards a constructionist vision of research (Gergen & Gergen, 2011; Holstein & Gubrium, 2008) and to conceptions of learning based on neuroscience (Fischer, 2009), Vygotskian social constructivism and the articulation of the curriculum though projects (Hernández, 2010); but also rhizomatic learning (Lind, 2005) and connectivism since in the different work sessions the youths learn with and from their colleagues using digital technologies.

The clearest limits of our research, as is generally the case in all learning framed in an institution, even though we surpass them, is found in the shortage of time for learning (Stoll, Fink & Earl, 2004). The fragmentations of the timetable, exams based on questions that already have an answer are educational aspects that are an obstacle to collaboration. In our cases, we had to unlearn and rethink the question of time, because research time is not the same as that of teaching and they had to pass several weeks before shaping a shared objective that led to the youths becoming involved as researchers and the learning process attained.

Finally, when working collaboratively, we cannot expect young people to have the same involvement all the time or contribute the same. This type of relationship brings out the potentialities of each one, making their contribution to the process a key aspect. In order do research and learn collaborating it is necessary to accept that each young person is distinct and that they will make different contributions. From this perspective digital technologies can facilitate collaboration improving group work, dialogue and learning from others and with others.

Support and acknowledgements

With the collaboration of the Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness. National Programme of Fundamental Research Projects, in the framework of the VI National Plan of Scientific Research, Development and Technological Innovation 2008-2011, and with the Office of Pedagogical Research and Training of the Teaching Staff of the UB. We would like to express our gratitude to Raquel Miño Puigcercós.

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