Chapter 9
Perceptions of Marginalized Youth on Learning through Technologies

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines students' views of learning with technologies through four related case studies that utilized online learning with marginalized young people. The studies were carried out in the UK, Austria, Ireland, Sweden and the USA with young people aged 14-21 who had dropped out of formal education. Ethnographic research was used but quantitative data was also gathered to contextualize the qualitative approach. The views and opinions of these young people were used to aid the development of online learning platforms and their content for use both with static computers and mobile devices. The results suggested that the young people embrace new technologies in such a way that they evidence deep thinking and deep learning. However, use of technologies in this way is not possible on a large scale within the existing school system. Further research should examine how the school system can better embrace the way that young people use Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) tools into their learning.

INTRODUCTION

This Chapter looks at views and perceptions of learning with technologies amongst the most marginalized of young people in the 14-21 age range in four European countries and the USA. It does not concern itself with those who succeed in the existing school system in these countries, but rather takes note of the opinions of those whom the education system appears to have failed. By listening to the opinions of those young people who are disengaged from learning, recognizing how they use technologies and implementing their views, it is conceivable that disaffection from formal education could be reduced.

One of the difficulties faced is the perception of learning by both adults and young people where technologies are concerned differs widely. Fisher, Harrison, Haw, Lewin, Lunzer, Mavers, McFlarlane, Scrimshaw and Somehk (2002) found that children used computers and the Internet more extensively at home than in the school environment where they experienced restricted access and filtering. The children did not always perceive their use of the Internet at home for research as learning even when used to do homework. Buckingham (2005) viewed the use of the Internet outside school as likely to involve a wide range of activities including chat, text messaging, online gaming, shopping, downloading music and film and researching data about hobbies and interests. In his opinion, "[w]hat they are doing to a significant degree is engaging in the purposeful pursuit of education" (p. 10). Nevertheless there is a climate in UK schools that bans access to social networking sites and Web 2.0 tools used by young people, ostensibly because of the risk of cyber bullying (Kernaghan, 2009). However, research indicates that young people extensively use these tools outside schools (Rudd & Walker, 2010). Thus a divide is created in the use and perception of learning with technologies both inside and outside school by both teachers and learners.

This Chapter considers research from four different projects that involved the development of online learning for marginalized young people; Notschool.net, ComeIn, In2ition and the Way Program pilot. In all cases, the views of the learners were instrumental in the design and ongoing development of the virtual learning communities. The use of new technologies, social networking, online communities and Web 2.0 tools have been integral parts of these successful online systems, reflecting how young people learn with new technologies and how they think they should be designed.

BACKGROUND

It could be argued that the concept of "Learner Voice" is already prevalent in schools (Hargreaves, 2004) with students taking part in Governors' meetings, teacher recruitment and controversially, observing teachers and giving them feedback about lessons, potentially influencing how technology is used. What is not clear from research is where the line is drawn between student voice being genuinely influential or tokenism. Nevertheless, this level of participation by learners in school organisations excludes by definition the views of those who are disengaged and do not attend. Although "disengagement from education by young people is of both political and economic concern as low educational attainment and absence from school or formal education is associated with unemployment, increased crime and poverty" (Johnson, Dyer & Lockyer, 2010a, p.1), the voice of marginalized youth is rarely heard in this context. Not only are they potentially a valuable asset to the economy, yet to be exploited, but also on the brink of becoming influential voters in the electoral system. Education continues to be at the heart of the political agenda, but the group most at risk of dropping out of formal education have little say in Government Policy.

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