

SKILLS OF SCEPTICISM AND JUDGEMENT OR HOW TO BE DIGITALLY ADULT

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Abstract: *Digital literacy has many aspects and different social groups can have an advantage if we consider the aspect of data-management or the aspect of context-awareness for example. In the mean time literacy and maturity are not in connection with age or social status: the way we use information for our or others sake and the grade of maturity in problem-solving are much more communication-sensitive virtues. What is happening now? – exactly this would be the question that makes all the difference. Basic skills for answering this question in a permanently changing digital environment are the skills of skepticism (is this for real?, is this about me?, is this something that somebody wants me to believe?) and judgment (arguments for and against, different points of view). And even a ten-year old kid could answer this question correctly, if we ask him this question, if we challenge him, to reflect on what is happening. Are we able to teach him to ask himself the right questions?*

Key words: *digital literacy, skepticism, reflexivity, judgment*

1. Introduction

What is happening right now with our world, our families, our kids? A legitimate question and we all are seeking answers. danah boyd (she writes her name intentionally with lowercase letters) is a principal researcher at Microsoft Research, the founder of Data & Society, also a visiting professor at New York University's Interactive Telecommunications Program. She published in 2014 a book about social lives of networked teens: *It's Complicated*. "As you read this book, my hope is that you will suspend your assumptions about youth in an effort to understand the social lives of networked teens. By and large, the kids are all right. But they want to be understood." (boyd, 2014) In an interview she said: "kids today aren't much different than they were decades ago; it's the world around them that's changed. «Young people are participating in the attention economy just like adults are. They're part of it; they're growing up with it; it's what they see all around them»". (Childress 2014)

According to boyd, we have to deal with our assumptions about youth, childhood and the role of adults in the processes of education. Perhaps young people are just as capable of judging situations, of making conscious decisions as we are.

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2. The Adult Ego State

Interactional theory has helped us to dismantle bias, reframing the setting or the view point (see Griffin 2008: 188.), and Eric Berne's transactional theory helped us elaborate a more useful model of communication with different ego states of a person in transactions with another *person's* ego states. (Berne 1964) Everybody has an adult ego state – a child too, and: "Some transactions involve ego states other than the Adult." – in the case of adults too.

The adult ego state implicates maturity and consciousness. Henry Jenkins, the Provost's Professor of Communication, Journalism, Cinematic Arts and Education at the University of Southern California, writes in *The Children's Culture Reader* edited by him in 1998: "Children, no less than adults, are active participants in that process of defining their identities, though they join those interactions from positions of unequal power." And: "Our grownup fantasies of childhood as a simple space crumble when we recognize the complexity of the forces shaping our children's lives and defining who they will be, how they will behave, and how they will understand their place in the world." (Jenkins 1998)

For example digital literacy has many aspects and different social groups can have an advantage if we consider the aspect of data-management or the aspect of context-awareness for example. In the mean time literacy and maturity are not in connection with age or social status: the way we use information for our or others sake and the grade of maturity in problem-solving are much more communication-sensitive virtues. Therefore, according to Jenkins "Children need adults to create the conditions through which they develop a political consciousness, to defend their access to the information they need, to frame their own judgments, and to build the technologies which enable them to exchange their ideas with others of their generation." (Jenkins 1998)

3. Digital Literacy reconsidered

The present research on digital and visual literacy was originally intended as a kind of media guide that maps the possible ways of preparation to live their entire lives in a knowledge-based, intensely informational age. (Armean 2017) The Center for Media Literacy (www.medialit.org) refers to UNESCO when speaking about its mission: "We must prepare young people for living in a world of powerful images, words and sounds." These materials of CML contain studies, research reports, concrete suggestions, and educational materials, and they are elaborated on the basis of a five-step model, and they have in common the acceptance of the following principles (as clarified by Hobbs in his summary of the debates on media literacy): "1. media messages are constructed; 2. media messages are produced within economic, social, political, historical and aesthetic contexts; 3. the interpretative meaning-making processes involved in message reception consist of an interaction between the reader, the text and the culture; 4. media have unique "languages", characteristics which typify various forms, genres and symbol systems of communication; 5. media representations play a role in people's understanding of social reality." (Hobbs, 1998)

3.1. Survey

In order to understand how kids will distinguish between the different layers of reality I made a very simple experiment. It targeted kids aged 10-11, and my goals were to talk about the internet with them (at the request of the parents and the school teacher), then to make them reflect on what is happening (on the internet). So I entered the classroom of 29 children in the fourth grade and

1. I introduced myself;
2. I talked about our topic: internet;
3. I asked them, if they know the movie *Inside out* (2015, directed by Pete Docter, Ronnie Del Carmen) – they know.
4. I asked them to imagine, which character in the movie (Joy, Fear, Anger, Disgust and Sadness), which emotion is navigating them mostly. And I explicitly asked them not to say the answer.
5. I presented them a book, and read a few lines from that (Author Shona Innes and illustrator Irisz Agocs: *The Internet is Like a Puddle*).
6. Then we talked about how the internet is like, and the kids actively contributed to new endings of the sentence: *The internet is like a/an ...*

After this discussion, everybody received one prepared paper, with two tasks. One task asked them to write it down in their own words what happened in the class from the beginning. The other task required them to shade or color a part of the circle meaning to what extent they could write it down, so to estimate, to what extent have they succeeded in answering the question “what happened?”.

3.2. Results

I expected that there will be circles totally colored and children thinking that they narrated everything they wanted to say. But no, they were very skeptical or realistic, conscious of the fact, that they could only tell their parts of reality, their version of the facts and the story of their own point of view. They intuitively knew what constructivism is about. (See Fig. 1.)

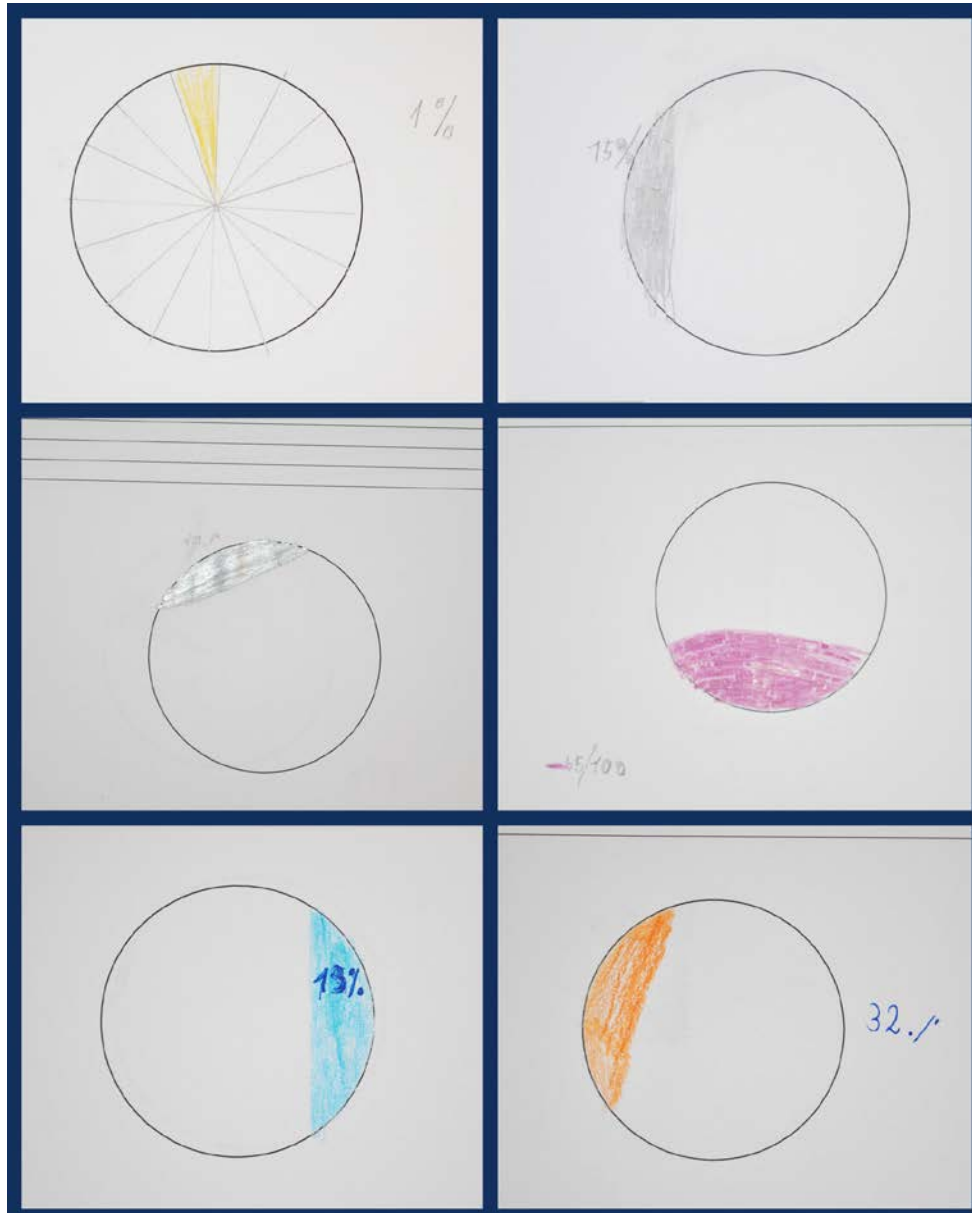


Fig. 1. Answers to the question: *To what extent have you succeeded in narrating?*

The numbers and the picture part of the answers do not correspond, but what we can see is the recognition of the fact, that only a very small part of the happenings can be verbally represented. 72% of the school students have mentioned a number under 50, and only one student named 99% (probably a very self – and media – confident one).

The moral of this experiment is that if a child is approached with a complex set of media-use-instructions, the message will encourage reflection and help the student focus on view points, interpretations, intentions of others, so a cognitive complexity can be reached. A simple question: “What happened?” brings skills of skepticism and judgment in action.

Because basic skills for answering this question in a permanently changing digital environment are the skills of skepticism (is this for real?, is this about me?, is this something that somebody wants me to believe?) and judgment (arguments for and against, different points of view). And even a ten-year old kid could answer this question correctly, if we ask him this question, if we challenge him, to reflect on what is happening.

4. Conclusions

In the age of electronic or digital literacy, university students learn many things at ICT classes (programs, keyboard shortcuts) which will probably be no longer relevant by the time they have learnt them (or in the slower version: by the time they have got out to the job market). Regardless of the program, the logic that has created the program, the program as a model is always there as a piece of knowledge – and in this, much of this knowledge is also part of the competence-package of critical thinking.

It is very important how a person thinks, how complex a person's cognitive abilities are, how complicatedly this person elaborates the message. How we act, behave, participate and not what we are (children or adults, young or old, with urban or rural origins, with academic or laborer parents, with advantaged or disadvantaged background). The demographical parameters are losing weight over the psychometrical parameters. Reframing age or gender is not an option, but even a child can choose an adult ego state.

In a Hungarian article journalist Mizsur speaks about behavioral research: "Although the content consumption patterns of generations are different, this does not only depend on age but also on many other factors (e.g. residence, education), said Nemes [Orsolya]. However, little research is underway in Hungary, she added. Similarly, Róbert Pintér said that there are significant differences in income, education and residence within a generation. According to him, with 5 to 6 variables, one group cannot be described well, so behavioral research is needed." (Mizsur 2017)

In my version of behavioral research putting the kids in the position of reflection, critical thinking and judgment helped me understand, that kids are truly all right. Moreover putting them in a more complicated, enrichment situation helped the kids to be all right. A "more complicated [even digital] social world stimulates the development of more complex ways of thinking and communicating. And once developed, complex ways of thinking and acting tend to perpetuate themselves." (Griffin 2008. 107.)

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