Chances and dangers of social networks in educational contexts

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German Version:
Chancen und Gefahren sozialer Netzwerke im Unterricht

Public opinion is unanimous: our future is digital. The world and our lives will be dominated by digital software, digital gadgets, digital media, digital economy and digital algorithms. And, of course, digital social networks. That's why people suppose that education, of course, must be and will be digital, too, and use digital gadgets, digital media and, last but not least, social networks for educational purposes.

It is supposed that digital education will be even much better than traditional education: educational software powered by artificial intelligence will present exercises tailored to the individual needs of every single pupil. Learning with tablet computers will be fun, visual media will enhance learning to the max. Also, educational software never gets angry at pupils and students, it never loses patience. It is available any time and anywhere on the internet and tablet computers or smartphones. And it never gets outdated, as updates arrive in real time via the net. The role of teachers will shift to some kind of learning companion who accompanies the students in their more or less autonomous voyage of learning.

Couldn't social networks revolutionise communication in educational contexts? Why not use Instagram to present and interchange educational projects? Can't foreign language teaching make use of Facebook and Twitter when German pupils communicate with their French exchange partners? How fast and easy could communication be between teachers, students and parents if everybody used WhatsApp on their smartphones?

Of course, data protection, copyrights, digital media addiction, fake news, cyber bullying etc. are known problems of social networks. But don't social networks have to be part of education in order to teach their responsible and intelligent usage? Learning by doing means that the use of social networks in class is necessary for teaching media competence.

Laptop classes did mainly fail because they were too expensive. Smartphones are already there, practically every student in secondary schools owns one, so schools don't have to buy them. "Bring Your Own Device" is the ideal solution introducing digital media into the classroom.

Before discussing the possible benefits of digitalisation, smartphones and social networks, we should think a moment about the nature of education. Education is not digital. Nobody learns "digitally".1 The human brain does not rely on bits and bytes, it is not a solid state disk that can be filled with information. Learning is about humans, it's about teachers and students. Teachers interact with students to help them concentrate on problems, learn, acquire knowledge and develop a free and responsible personality. Learning and education are social processes. Before we revolutionise these processes using digital gadgets and social networks, we have to be sure that this revolution will be really helpful. There are reasons to doubt that, as we will see.

Learning does not merely mean to acquire information about a subject. If it would, schools wouldn't be necessary, as it would suffice to know how to google. Knowledge is more than information. Knowledge is the evaluation of information and the extraction of meaning from information. In order to know something, you have to be able to answer questions like: Which information is false, which true? What is important, what irrelevant? What is fact, what opinion? What is good or bad for me, for society, for humanity? What are the consequences or the alternatives to given situations? Learning means to assimilate knowledge and thus be able to solve problems and conflicts.

Every single teacher has always known the fact, but John Hattie's study "Visible learning" massively confirmed it: The teacher's role is at the centre of learning.2 The teacher embodies the learning goals: His enthusiasm for the subject ideally thrills or at least motivates the students, his professionalism ensures the learning progress. The teacher's role cannot be delegated to machines, to tablet computers and educational software. Degrading teachers to learning companions or some kind of servicemen for digital gadgets ruins learning and education.

Education is more than making students acquire knowledge. Education means to help students develop an intelligent and responsible personality, equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to lead a successful life in human society. The human relationships and role models in the classroom are the basis of education. Pupils cannot acquire social skills interacting mainly with screens, educational software and social networks. They need direct social interaction with their fellow students and the teacher.

If human relationships are at the heart of education, digital media can only be an occasional accessory, not the basis of education. Students cannot develop a responsible and free personality, if they interact mainly with screens instead of human beings. Screen use already dominates much of the time students spend outside of school, so there is no need to give students even more screen time putting digital media in the centre of education.

The use of social networks in education encounters legal obstacles. Social networks hosted on non European servers don't protect personal data according to German legislation. That's the reason why the educational use of all relevant social networks, i. e. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, WhatsApp etc. is strictly forbidden by local legislation. These social networks may only be used in class for demonstration purposes, that is in order to show their functions, features and risks.3 The massive leak of millions of Facebook profiles recently illustrated the data security problems. The danger of infringing copyright legislation accompanies teachers constantly when using digital media in the classroom. The introduction of an educational cloud to

provide legal access for teachers in Baden-Württemberg to royalty-free educational media recently failed due to technical problems.

Addictive behaviour patterns seem to be massively triggered by the use of digital media. In South Corea, there are already rehab camps for internet addicted teenagers. Statistics show that since the introduction of smartphones and social networks, teens tend to spend less time hanging out with friends, get less sleep and are more likely to feel lonely. The addictive character of social networks is no coincidence: Developers of social networks and Internet games know and, at times, admit, that addiction is part of their design strategies.4 Media addiction entails other health threats like depression, obesity and even suicide.5 Introducing the massive use of digital media in school in order to prevent media abuse seems contradictory, like a fire-fighter calling for petrol.

Studies show that the mere presence of a smartphone lessens the capacity of concentration, even if it's off.6 Learning is impossible without concentration. Without concentration, we cannot solve problems. When schools prohibit the use of smartphones on the campus, teachers and pupils often feel it clearly benefits concentration, social interaction and education. In Germany, Bayern has banned smartphones from schools, in France, president Macron plans to do so next autumn.

According to a study, bullying among students via social networks or cyberbullying affects more than a million pupils in Germany alone.7 Cyber bullying and other problems related to social networks are widely part of prevention programmes in German schools. All in all, social networks seem to present much more of a challenge or even danger than help for attaining educational goals.

You don't acquire media competence by using Google, Facebook or Twitter. Facebook, Twitter or other social networks provide no means of telling apart truth and lies, news and fake news. Only a solid fact and knowledge-based

education provides the orientation students need in a digital world. The distraction potential of smartphones and social networks rather than help counteract most educational goals. That's why their use in educational contexts must be limited and well considered.

The history of education since the middle of the twentieth century is a series of failed technical hypes: In the seventies, foreign language teachers believed in sophisticated and expensive language labs that have been removed a decade or two later. In the seventies and eighties, film, TV and video entered the classroom. But the initial hope, that massive use of high quality educational video per se would enhance learning achievements did not come true. In the nineties, laptop classes and the Internet seemed the new holy grail of education. They, too, failed, due to high costs, small bandwidth and poor results. The new hype are tablet computers, educational software and, perhaps social networks. You don't have to be a prophet to know: This technological hype, too, will fail. Why? Because learning and education are not about techniques or gadgets, they are profoundly social and human. And anyway: Who knows whether we'll talk about tablet computers or smartphones in, let's say, five years? Then, it'll be perhaps HoloLenses or some other new gadget.

Does this mean, that we have to ban smartphones and social networks from the classroom? Not necessarily. Although the high hopes we put in other technical hypes did not come true, teachers still use TV, video, computers or the internet in specific educational contexts, when those media make sense, when their use yields an added educational value to the class. This could apply equally to educational software, smartphones and, eventually, social networks.

Before using social networks in education, we need to solve their legal issues. One way could be to regulate social networks effectively, constraining Facebook, Instagram etc. to respect local legislation on personal data security. Given the monopolistic power of those companies, this seems quite a challenge. Another way is to emulate their features on legally secure school servers.

A meaningful example is the European project eTwinning: A platform for the communication and cooperation of teachers and their classes across Europe.8 It can be useful in foreign language teaching, because it allows secure digital communication of teachers and students with their exchange partners in another European country. Students can collaborate and communicate via internet forums, blogs, chats or video conferencing. Authentic communication via digital messaging can motivate students, enrich teaching and foster language learning. International collaboration of students across Europe based on digital platforms like eTwinning can also train collaborative competences, intercultural skills and international understanding, thus hopefully contributing to build a better world.

Digital media, gadgets and educational software cannot and must not replace completely traditional ways of learning. More than to anything else, this applies to social networks, as they present some very special risks and side effect. But the dose makes the poison: Used in specific and well considered educational contexts, social networks, like any other traditional or digital media or technical gadget before, could make a meaningful contribution to learning and education in schools.

1 See "Ralf Lankau: Kein Mensch lernt digital. Über den sinnvollen Einsatz neuer Medien im Unterricht. Verlagsgruppe Beltz, Weinheim 2017.

2 John Hattie: "Visible Learning", Routledge, New York 2009.

3 For the prohibition of the use of Social Networks in the land of Baden-Württemberg see the Ministry of Culture?s regulations on the internet: https://it.kultus-bw.de/,Lde/Startseite/IT-Sicherheit/soziale-netzwerke

4 See the interview with Sean Parker, the founding president of Facebook, on Axios: https://www.axios.com/sean-parker-unloads-on-facebook-god-only-knows-what-its-doing-to-our-childrens-brains-1513306792-f855e7b4-4e99-4d60-8d51-2775559c2671.html

5 See for example the Open Letter from JANA Partners and CALSTRS to APPLE INC: https://thinkdifferentlyaboutkids.com/index.php?acc=1

6 See UTNews: "The Mere Presence of Your Smartphone Reduces Brain Power, Study Shows"
https://news.utexas.edu/2017/06/26/the-mere-presence-of-your-smartphone-reduces-brain-power

7 Süddeutsche Zeitung, 16. Mai 2017, "1,4 Millionen Schülerinnen und Schüler von Cybermobbing betroffen",
http://www.sueddeutsche.de/panorama/jugendliche-im-internet-prozent-der-schueler-sehen-sich-als-opfer-von-cybermobbing-1.3507917

8 See https://www.etwinning.net/de/pub/index.htm