



ITALIAN JOURNAL OF SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION

Editor-in-Chief: Silvio Scanagatta | ISSN 2035-4983

## Mitigating Generation Gap in Digital Age. Competences, Concerns, Implications

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### Article first published online

November 2018

### HOW TO CITE

Üzümcü, H. E. (2018). Mitigating Generation Gap in Digital Age. Competences, Concerns, Implications. *Italian Journal of Sociology of Education*, 10(3), 310-318. doi: 10.14658/pupj-ijse-2018-3-17

## Mitigating Generation Gap in Digital Age. Competences, Concerns, Implications

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[Review of the book: *Sguardi digitali. Studenti, docenti e nuovi media*, by Chiara Pattaro, Claudio Riva and Chiara Tosolini, FrancoAngeli, Milano, 2017. ISBN: 9788891762047]

The speed of the developments in modern communication technologies demands a development of competent skills accordingly. In order to keep up with the information today in this capitalism-based network society (Castells, 2010), people in many sectors including education are required to gain certain digital competences. Acquiring digital skills has also been significant to understanding interactions and identity constructions in youth. Historically, children and adolescents have been considered active participants of mass communication media (Anderson et al, 2001, p.1; Scarcelli & Riva, 2016, p.86). Today their everyday life is closely engaged with digital media (Buckingham, 2007). As Livingstone (2002, p.16) argues, new media features enable them to create their peer culture and play a key role in their identity formation. The media-related interactions contribute considerably in their social and emotional development (Pattaro, 2015, p. 320). Integrated in many spheres of young people's lifeworlds, such activities offer them spaces of generational interaction, ease of learning, peer socialization and augmentation of technological skills (Scarcelli and Riva, 2016, p.89-96). Nonetheless, their digital practices are mostly articulated by adults, which serves reproducing generational power (Drotner, 2009, p.361). The perceived trends set in their generation seem to conflict with those adults everlastingly. Given that social processes cannot be understood without technological tools (Castells, 2010, p.5), how have the media and communication technologies transformed adult-young relations? How can the differences in technolog-

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ical experience be overcome so as to sustain the mutual interaction? What are the roles of the extent of digital skills in decreasing generational gap?

The book, *Sguardi Digitali: Studenti, Docenti e Nuovi Media* (in English: “Digital gazes: Students, teachers and new media”), goes after these questions and gives a thorough outlook of people’s attitudes towards novelties in digital communications. As the back-cover copy states, it offers an inter-generational analysis on exploring the “we-they” dichotomy in the context of media by giving voice to the students and teachers. Throughout the book, a range of concepts and discourses is emphasized in relation to media uses of young people, their knowledge-building and autonomy as well as adult resistance to technologies. The discussions touch on the links among digital competences, responsibilities and agency.

The exceptionality of this academic research-based publication is that it provides a confrontational perspective between generations on a recently proliferated and globalized issue: the new media usage. It not only reveals the dynamics of the intergenerational gap in this sense, but also approaches to it in a solution-oriented way, offering ideas to bridge between both of these generations. The authors state that new media is not just a communication tool for young people, but also a cultural component that they share. From social network sites (SNSs) like Facebook to user-generated content (UGC) sites with diverse multimedia features enabling social competences and expressions, new media environments have become their platform of identity construction. According to the authors, such technologies form a major reason of conflict between young people and adults. They seek to understand the differences in perception of uses of new media tools by constantly changing actors of younger and older generations. In order to do so, they refer to the essay “The Barbarians: An essay on the Mutation of Culture” written by a widely read Italian author, Alessandro Baricco.

Baricco draws attention to the today’s altering cultural consumption rituals compared to old times. Commercialization and digitalization of the information flow dragged many people in a mutation, as he calls it. He argues that there are two social actors of consumption: the barbarians and the civilized ones. “Simplification, superficiality, speed, middlingness” (Baricco, 2013, p.126) is the tendency of barbarians, while civilized ones value for sophistication. Barbarians go for surfaces rather than depths, as describes the term coined in last century: *surfing*. In this dichotomy of civilized-barbarian, adults are considered civilized, while young people are barbarians. The actors of adulthood and youth continually change, but older keep considering the younger as barbarians. Former generations would think that their time was more mindful, whereas the next generations are attracted to facile and spectacular forms.

One may ask why Baricco's essay would be important in discussing media uses of young people since it does not necessarily focus on new media at all? Why would one come up with debates of developing a sophisticated taste and consumption when addressing modern communication technologies and today's youth? The authors actually found a great connection between the arguments of the book and their research questions. What the essay seeks to suggest is that the older generations tend to criticize the practices of latter generations. The culture of living constantly changes as new traditions, new modes of interaction and new technologies emerge. In this ceaselessly transforming local and global cultures, one may face two choices, either keeping up with the changes as far as s/he can or sticking to the culture of his/her time. Baricco argues that the older people often despise everyday life practices of the younger ones and resist to novelty, while they cannot notice that their own practices were indeed once despised by elder generations. This goes in a vicious cycle.

*Sguardi Digitali* is grounded on a two-facet research. In one of the two veins of their study, the authors aim to explore how young people would describe their uses of new media in their own words, and if they recognize the generational gap with the adults and if there was any influence of adult narrations on their self-expressions. In this sense, this part of the research not only questions the differences in adult-young experiences and but also adult-young power relations over the digital media argument. The method of answering them is an interesting and a challenging one: The authors employed Baricco's essay as a research instrument for stimulating young people's reflections and making them active participants.

Looking closer at the methodology, this empirical research was conducted in Veneto region (Northern Italy) within two upper secondary classrooms in s.y. 2013-14, 2014-15 and 2016-17. Oral and written reflections of a total of 50 third grade upper secondary school students (broadly 16-year-olds) formed the data for the first phase of research. The teacher, who is a researcher as well, either read the aforesaid essay of Baricco to students or asked them to read some parts of it as homework. In both cases, the teacher and the students discussed and reflected on it in the class. With the aim of exploring their construction of self-image in terms of new media uses, the teacher took due care to encourage students to provide their critical considerations freely. In this respect, the study involved an *active participatory research approach*, which is nowadays recognized as a highly useful methodology with children and young people. Working with them is different from working with adults, considering their developmental differences and particularly their position in the society as a minor group and exposure to unequal power relations with adults (Punch, 2002a; Christensen & James, 2008). Such task-based activities not only foster the perception of children

and young people as social agents, but also provide opportunities for their fuller participation in decision-making and expressing themselves (Punch, 2002b; Boyden & Ennew, 1997). This phase of data collection was concluded upon written contributions of students. They completed a commentary assignment on the Baricco's essay, discussing their ideas around the central theme and relating it to their everyday life practices in a particular focus on digital media and social networking. They were allowed to have an open access to essay for any references. As a conventional examination process, their papers were marked by the teacher.

In the second vein of the research, the authors aimed at understanding teachers' opinions on new media and young people's use of it. More precisely, they target to explore through teachers' eyes: 1. Young people's use of new media; 2. Positive influences of new media on young people; 3. Negative influences of new media on young people; 4. Solutions to mitigate risks of media; 5. Strategies to overcome generational gap. They conducted semi-structured interviews with 50 upper secondary school teachers of various course subjects (25 men and 25 women with mean age 44), working in diverse schools in Veneto region. In this sense, school environment was employed as a platform where the media uses of young people and adults can intersect and the differences may stand out evidently.

The book is organized around six chapters. By their topics, the chapters can be divided broadly into two parts. First part, that includes the first three chapters, makes a comparison between the gazes of young people and adults on young people's online behaviours. On the other hand, the second part with the latter three chapters focus on teachers in terms of didactical concerns on their digital competences and recommendations on reducing the generational gap in terms of digital media approaches between teachers and students.

In more detail, Chapter One introduces the theoretical framework of media and youth intersections and includes main conceptions of new media studies in the context of young people's involvement. It further gives an overview of the terms that define the "digitalized" life of today's children, such as *cyberkids* (Holloway & Valentine, 2003) and *born digital* (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008). The literature conceptualizes young people's digital competences in various ways. Drusian & Riva (2010) coins the term *bricoleur high tech* in order to describe young people's ability and flexibility to choose the new media tool that best presents the content that they want to convey. In this perspective, one can find a detailed literature review on diverse debates in youth and media context from cyberbullying to technological fever and to adult "gaze" to young people and media, in addition to an extensive evaluation of digital risks and opportunities faced by youth in everyday life.

Chapter Two begins by introducing Baricco's aforementioned essay and discusses the reason why it was a choice as a research instrument. The chapter is attributed to the young people's gaze: it reflects the voice of students on their own self-image in regards to their use of modern communication tools and it shares the results of first phase of the research. Engaging Baricco's essay into the research -such use of innovative technique as a stimulus material- appeared to be both strength and weakness of the study. The advantage underlying this technique of participatory action research is that it highlights young people's agency in an adult-dominated society and engage them as active participants rather than objects of concern (O'Kane, 2008, p.125). During the discussions of the essay in the class, self-expressions of the students were reported to be quite open, critical and authentic. Nevertheless, as one of the main findings suggest, when it came to the written exam, they ended up interpreting the essay through the "adult perspective", associating young people's practices with barbarians, or, criticizing their "excessive" dependency to digital communication technologies. In other words, they let adult opinions suppress their own opinions for the sake of its "rightness" although they expressed orally quite the contrary. This tendency may mirror their perception of themselves as a futuristic project, human becomings rather than human beings (Qvortrup, 2009). The authors make a self-criticism on this sharp change in students' expressions and state that they may have felt writing through the eyes of adults -the so-called civilised- as the "correct" answer, since the exam was subject to marking. This fact can also be said to have reproduced unequal power relations between the researcher and young people.

The essay by Baricco was originally published in 2006. However, the research was conducted some years later in three periods: 2013-14, 2014-15 and 2016-17; meaning that the essay was presented to the students from 7 up to 11 years after its publication. Considering the rapid emergence of new media platforms and the changing uses of existing media tools, the themes addressed in the essay risked to be outdated by the time it was involved within the research. For instance, besides digital technologies, the essay also argued television, which is not regarded by young people as it used to be by then. As the researchers observed, the young people having participated in the research in 2013-15 period could associate themselves with the protagonist of the essay, while those participated later in 2017 had difficulty in relating themselves both to the language used in the essay and the content, which appeared to be obsolete. As a result, this may indicate that their reflections could have been more insightful if the research instrument was up-to-date, facilitating their engagement with the study subject. The authors further express their concerns that the book may also have been heavy in its structure as the teacher was faced with many questions asking for clarification on

main points in the essay. From this standpoint, the chapter comprehensively reflects on the pros and cons of employing such research instrument with 16-year-olds and thus contributes in the literature of research with children.

Chapter Three, on the other hand, argues the teachers' gaze on digital involvement of their young students. The data from the semi-structured interviews suggested a common opinion: Most teachers agreed on having observed young people as a generation that is ceaselessly connected to web as vital source. Positive opinions included the ease of access to multimedia information sources. Negative opinions, instead, involved young people's failure to go for reliable sources to gain information and be critical in their research strategy, opting for copy-and-paste based "superficial research". Some teachers also referred to young people's tendency to spend excessive amount of time on social networking, the "virtual relationships" through a monitor, privacy-related concerns due to sharing contents of private life, risks of abuse and cyberbullying. In this sense, chapter two and three can be considered complementary to one another, since in the first, the researchers provide young people's evaluation of their new media use and in the latter, the teachers' evaluation on the same topic. Thus, the authors clearly make us see the generational differences and the barbarian-civilised vicious cycle proven to be present.

The second part of the book is principally concerned with young people's complex digital competences and online socialization dynamics, and teachers' position in keeping up with this persistently changing and digitalizing world. Chapter Four elaborates theoretically on digital literacy, circulation of knowledge, digital divide, digital inequalities and digital competences. As a road map, it uses Waschauer's (2003) four literacy forms that shed light on effective use of technology. *Computer literacy* refers to a necessary knowledge of hardware and software; *information literacy* is the ability to utilise, select, save, archive the information; *multimedia literacy* refers to the skills of incorporating different types of media and producing it in a multimedia environment; lastly *computer-mediated communication (CMC) literacy* is the competence of effectively engaging in online communication. Such division enables to analyse the inequalities in access to media and address the unequal distribution of competences as a social issue. The terms build up a background knowledge for the following chapters, thus this chapter could be considered introductory. It concludes by discussing school's role in augmenting these fields of literacy.

Quite a critical one, Chapter Five proposes a broader approach to teachers' digital competences and the use of technology for educational purposes. It evaluates the current Italian institutional practices for involving technology as an educational medium. The Ministry of Education, University and Research [Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della Ricerca (MIUR)] in

Italy and other relevant public bodies invest large amounts of money in the digital resources and their scholarly integration. Yet, the need for investing in improving teachers' and practitioners' competences does not seem to be equally taken into account. This lack of balance has been reported to expand the generational gap between teachers and students, instead of diminishing as intended. From this viewpoint, the chapter comprises an extensive overview of local projects of digitalizing education and teachers' struggle to adapt these emerging novelties and provides a strong resource for understanding the present situation of Italian schools in regards to digitalization.

In Chapter Six, the authors focus on teachers' perception on the official process of integrating digital media as didactical materials and seek solutions through their own voice to the incompatibility between the advanced digital resources in the school environment and the requirements from teachers in terms of their technological skills. Most of the informant teachers have been found to be minimally engaged in using digital communication tools. Most reported to search for information on the web as their most common online behaviour. In order to reach out to younger generations, the teachers propose solutions such as 1. having seminars and workshops for improving and practising the digital competences, 2. having e-learning environments where they can work on practising these skills by themselves with no time and space boundaries, 3. having open access and free information on use of technology, which would enable them to help young students.

Having argued the gazes of students and teachers to adaptation to new media tools and their role in young people's identity formation, the authors conclude by taking their own gaze as researchers upon research questions and findings. They briefly sum up the implications with references to relevant literature and most importantly, highlight the need for an understanding and dialogue in adults-young people relations by listening to their voices. The book points out two current major problems in comprehending intergenerational relations in this digital age. One is that although young people are aware of the conflicting opinions on their online behaviours between adults and themselves, they consult to adult opinion when describing their self-representation on digital platforms. Their identities appear to be partially based on their agency, mostly on the domineering adult –the civilised- intervention: In other words, the vicious cycle of considering the next generation as barbarians and declaring the self as civilised and dominating ones influence self-gaze of younger generations. The latter problem is the need for digital literacy trainings for adults in order to mitigate the generational gap, particularly in educational context.

In conclusion, this book provides extensive insights on a participatory action research with young people, which can constitute a guide for the academics and researchers who wish to have a better understanding of ad-



vantages and disadvantages of its practices. Throughout the research, it is evident that the authors have the aim of meeting on a common ground with young people and encouraging them for a critical approach and a responsible participation to new media. The findings presented in the book are invaluable for the case of Veneto region in Italy. Nevertheless, they would have been undoubtedly more informative, if the fieldwork had been expanded into other regions. Achieving so could have allowed a manifestation of regional differences in practices of including technology in Italian schools and approaches of young people with wider sociodemographic backgrounds. The data from the qualitative fieldwork is well-argued in intergenerational context and gives a panorama of paradoxes, conflicts and ambiguities experienced by younger and older generations. Yet, older ones have been overrepresented on the scales of these generations. The book comes up with a range of solutions to improve teachers' adaptation to uses of digital resources and their dialogue with young students in terms of new media access.

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