Young People and Contemporary Digital Arenas:  
Identity, Learning and Abusive Practices  

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The aim of this paper is to outline an emerging research area, evolving around young people and contemporary digital arenas. The field is growing in size, shape and complexity and the need for investigations is demanding. The research area is also somewhat elusive and its outline is changing very quickly over time. In previous works the authors have focused on different parts of this area, and in this paper we bring our ideas together to form a joint research base. The first theme is identity; what factors influence young people’s identity development and how do we interpret identity in a changing media landscape as well as in a changing society? The second theme is learning; have contemporary media influenced the processes and outcomes of learning and if so, how can the educational system exploit and benefit from this? The third theme is what we in this context call abusive practices; how can we understand abusive behavior on the internet, among and towards young people? The issues problematized in this paper are to be seen as a probing for and a framing of a research base for further development.

Several conclusions can be drawn that contributes to outline what we see as an emerging research area around young people, contemporary digital natives, identity, learning and abusive practices. We argue that the increased opportunities for communication and user participation offered by Web 2.0 provide us with possibilities as well as challenges. Problems such as harassment and deception are imported into an increasing number of channels, and thus increase the vulnerability of young digital natives and their communities. Consequently, the expanding arenas of the digital culture, the potential vulnerability of members of the young digital community and its identity construction, teachers’ insecurity and at the same time, their central role in technology and values teaching, are all problematics that we wish to explore in terms of the research. As such the proposed research intention aims to focus on the pedagogical potential afforded by contemporary digital arenas. Further aims are to embrace social and cultural perspectives on contemporary technology by focusing on social values and net cultures at the intersection of age, class, gender and ethnicity. Overall, such perspectives are important since they encourage adopting a critical approach towards education and technology use.

The overall aim of the proposed area of study is to identify, analyze and problematise contemporary digital channels of communication and learning in particular, expressions of abusive behavior, and their influence on digital culture and digital native identity construction, with a specific emphasis on issues related to age, class, gender and ethnicity.

The emerging picture will be analyzed from a critical perspective with reference to technological development (e.g. Aviram & Tami 2007; Sanders 2006), an intersectional, critical perspective concerning identity (e.g. de los Reyes & Mulinari 2005; Delgado & Stefancic 2001), and a sociocultural theoretical perspective with regard to learning (e.g. Vygotskij 2001; Säljö 2005). More specifically the research will identify and study the following areas or themes:

- Webb 2.0 and abusive practices, in particular concerning discrimination;
- Values and digital cultures;
- Identity construction of the digital native or community in relation to learning processes.

The overarching research questions are: What are the possibilities and dilemmas associated to contemporary digital channels and how do they influence and interact with learning possibilities and identity construction for young people? Further, how can this together be analyzed and understood from an intersectional perspective?