WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT THE NETWORK GENERATION? THE REALITY AND EXPECTATIONS OF THE DIGITALIZATION OF SCHOOLS

Elżbieta Perzycka
University of Szczecin
Department of Humanities
71-423 Szczecin, ul. Ogińskiego 16/17
email: eperzyk@gmail.com

Abstract: The development of civilization has contributed to another change in the approach to education under the influence of the new state of knowledge resulting from the information boom in the new media. On the one hand higher education facilities aim at revitalization and cultivation of traditional values that are included in widely understood humanism trend. On the other hand a higher or lower level of compliance with increasing technological wave may be observed.
The paper begins with the characteristics of the reality in which the subjects of education with access to digital media exist. Amongst others terms the concepts *network generation, kids in the Internet, information competence* are explained. Next, the increasing wave of new media tools as well as their management for the purpose of higher education is referred to. In the end a 'macro' and a 'micro' change and implications resulting from this fact for school digitalization in real and expectation perspective are summarized.

Keywords: network society, network generation, teacher, student, the digitalization of school.

Introduction

Theoretically, an unlimited freedom of choice that a subject of education experiences are not only representations of identity, subjective truths of beings, but also predispositions for acquiring knowledge about itself and the world by means of digital media. A student and a teacher when starting a joint educational path face a choice: whether to be conscious creators or passive consumer of 'media reality'. Which path will they chose? How well is school prepared for the digitalization of education? Is it attainable or is it still a distant prospect? These are the questions that I will attempt to answer referring to sources from the field of psychology, sociology, philosophy and education, own research, reports from study published in Poland and other countries.

Network society or networking society? – explanation of terms

Network student or Networking student? This is one of a few questions that I pose when preparing another syllabus for classes from the field of media pedagogy and information and communication technology.

The term network society was used for the first time by Jan van Dijk in his book *Der Netwerkmaatschappij* published in 1991 where he defined it as a society modeled by mass media, whose role is mainly to socialize and organize all civilizational strata, namely individual, group and mass, in reference to widely understood mass media. This author when examining this new arising generation notices also that *in the network society social relations become more and more interactive by means of connecting social and medial networks with multilateral communications* [Van Dijk 2010, p. 62]. Later, a Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells used this term and propagated it in his book *Network Society* which caused him to be recognized as its creator. On the basis of the research conducted in the USA, Asia, South America and Europe he created his own systematic theory of information society taking into consideration the increasing influence of the Internet on the

contemporary world [Castells 2003]. After going deeper into Jan van Dijk's theory concerning the forming of the society by media and technology, he noticed the marvel of his predecessor's theory and analyzed it again focusing mainly on the aspect of the rapidly developing Internet. After deep research and observation of the new technological creation he narrowed down to a statement that the Internet as a global network became a basis for creating the identity of modern societies. On Polish grounds T. Goban-Klas uses the term 'networking society' [Goban–Klas 2004, p. 292] in reference to transmission of human relations. He takes the network as a form of media whose content is information and whose essence is communication. A highly developed concept of network society is to be found in a collection of scientific essays by E. Benedyk [2004]. He points to the utility of the Internet in preparing material and social analysis of the present. "Network Society" seems to be a slightly narrow term since it gains a quality of being dependent on the network and not a conscious participation in it. The adjective *networking* identifies each member of the society who uses information technology but it also constitutes it integral element. In the Internet one may notice an application diversity caused by collective contribution of its users. However, the Internet is most of all a tool and its users use it for their work or private life. Same interactions in the network like for example roleplaying and building an identity are small part of interpersonal relations and seems to be popular mainly amongst teenagers. The dispute on terms is to be left to M. Castells, for he wrote: *Why won't you leave me alone? I don't want any part of your Internet, your technical civilization, your network society! I want to live on my own! Well, if you think so I have bad news for you. Although you don't care about the networks they will take care of you. As long as you will want to live in a society here and now you will have to put up with a networking society because we live in the Galaxy of the Internet* [Castells 2003, p. 303]. The term *networking society* despite its linguistic ambiguity seems to be a far more precise term reflecting the users' participation in the web resources.

Who is a student in the web?

The spread of the Internet allowed continuous experimenting. Given favourable conditions we are able to produce things that we see in others as non-standard for ourselves [Wallace 2003, p. 8]. On the Internet an identity becomes diffused being temporary at the same time. We get the ability to change our image, the way of thinking and behavior virtually without any consequences. We multiply ourselves on the Web. It seems safe to say that every identity improves the next one although we cannot forget to ask another question: in what direction does it head?

I agree with P. Wallas that the users of the Internet by their influence can shape virtual environment on condition that they are aware of the way it changes the perception and behaviour of the receiver [Wallace 2003, p. 9]. Blogs are helpful in building a 'network' identity. Its author knows that it is him or her who is the initiator of the topic and the creator of the way the form is presented. One creates a true or invented identity by free arrangement of the content in order to achieve a certain response.

During talks with young academic students on the topic of the web I noticed that not only blogs are a place for identity creation. A regular e-mail address or a Facebook account, message board, forum, or any other form of communication. We can create any number of new identities in each of the places. What is the purpose of this? In what direction does our ethic side of life on and offline go? Uncritical approach and the ability of producing multiple identities are becoming a great problem of shaping attitudes of networking society towards itself and others societies. Giddens' claim gains important meaning and value, *Being honest with yourself means finding yourself, but since it is an active process of creating oneself it has to be oriented on a holistic aim – freeing oneself from the necessity and achieving fulfillment* [Giddens 2007, p. 110].

The Internet, and that is why we cannot, however, forget that there is another user right beside us, who as well as we, can create and use those resources. We need not forget that the environment we create will be the same as we are.

Preparing students for *being* in a networking society

I am cognitively curious about phenomena that happen while students are using the information resources of the Internet. One may ask what kind of phenomena those are and why do they occur? While observing the behavior of students using smartphones or tablets I noticed a new phenomenon they call *checking in*. A person visiting a new place wants to inform his friends about that. The person takes a photo of the place and posts it on Facebook. He checked in, he showed the world what he has done, where and with whom. He impatiently awaits how many people will react to his post. After receiving a *like it* confirmation the person seeks the next opportunity to check in. The number of people who *like it* becomes the most important thing in everyday life. I also found it surprising that the place visited by this person whether an exotic beach or antique building, was not interesting for him or her at all. After checking in they moved to another place without any reflection on where they have been, what they have seen or felt at that moment. I wonder what reflections the picture will evoke after a few years if they ever go back to it. From this perspective I can notice a problem concerning the search for a satisfying range of competence determining effective learning [Czerepaniak–Walczak 1997, p. 87] in the field of processing digital information and reflecting on the source of the knowledge.

The beginnings of this innovative movement may be observed in the USA (Ch. Bruce, 1997 [Eisenberg], AASL and AECT, 1998[1], ACRL, 2000[2]);, Great Britain (M.B. Eisenberg and R.E. Berkowitz, 1990, SCONUL, 1999); Australia and New Zeeland (ANZIL and CAUL, 2004)[3]. In their footsteps follow China, North Korea, Argentina and a number of European countries including Czech Republic, Norway, Sweden and Poland.

Within the academic education reform one may observe operations aiming at broadening the field of learning technological and informational skills. In Poland students' informational competence which is invaluable for their being conscious and critical members of the web society is not developed [Perzycka 2008]. Students still copy papers from the Internet, encounter difficulties while preparing the technical side of their papers, commission writing their MA or BA papers to other people. They cannot critically evaluate the content of the web. They are not able to estimate the educational value of web pages, list sources found on the Internet or even write an e-mail. They are used to abbreviations and slogans which they use in their works believing they will be understood. What should higher education school do with this problem? Following the rule proposed by Z. Melosik, according to which "what in one theory has a key role is marginalized in the other; what in one is 'macro' in the other is 'micro'. Entering languages offered to us by different discourses we notice a rich variety of meanings that are used to describe the world. This teaches us to be humble – the world is too complicated, dispersed and decentralized to close it down into one narration" [Melosik, Szkudlarek 1998, p. 35]. *Every theory may describe the world to a certain degree. The social world is not ontologically monolithic: it is diverse, complicated, self-contradictory, dynamic, constantly open, in the process of coming to being* [Melosik 1995, p. 20]. It is advised to be critical about the curricula that should involve hanging conditions of their implementation as well as varying competences of the web society. This is also noticed by a web generation specialist Don Tapscott [2010] and M. Czerepaniak-Walczak [2008, p. 149]. Who propose to evaluate each and every bit of information by making an effort to tell the truth from probability and delusion; to learn to distinguish fiction from reality, which most certainly will facilitate students' work in the new technological civilization.

---

[1] American Association of School Librarians. Information Literacy Standards for Student Learning, 1998 [w:] http://www.ala.org/ala/aasl/aaslproftools/informationpower/InformationLiteracyStandards_final.pdf/12.05.20012

[2] ACRL Institute for Information Literacy [w:] http://www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlissues/acrlinfolit/professactivity/iil/welcome.htm z dnia 12.05.2012.

[3] ANZIIL Australian and New Zealand Institute for Information Literacy [w:] http://www.anziil.org/ 12.05.2012.

Preparing a student to be a worker in the network society

Young people have the instinctive aptitude for technical novelties that older people see as unusual. The web is for them a natural way of communication, learning, searching for information and doing many other things [Tapscott 2010, p. 50]. Student during his education improves his technical abilities to use a computer. But they lack a critical reflection when surfing on the Internet. Why?

The new generation that functions in the web space as in their own element values its freedom of choice the most. These are the people who want to suit things to their needs and individualize them according to their liking. *They have a natural inclination for taking actions together, they are in favour of a dialogue and reject what is exclaimed ex cathedra. They thoroughly examine coworkers and organizations. They demand credibility. They want to have fun even at work or school. Fast pace is a form of innovation for them – an inseparable part of life* [Tapscott 2010, p. 46].

D. Tapscott's approach towards the new generation is full of reflection. He observed that students' attitude towards new technologies is different, more courageous and open than their teachers [Wilber 2010]. Referring to K. Wilber's work the baby-boom generation are the biggest group amongst academic teachers raised long before the Internet was created. Their actions are tainted with certain schemata. One might say these were sequential actions - from the beginning until the end, (observing many members of this generation – parents, acquaintances, teachers – I dare to say that this system still operates). Everything had to have its beginning, middle and an end as well as its rhythm, place and order. Along with the new informational-digital era this system had do change, which brought many difficulties to a number of members of this generation. *Networkers*, however, got used to the computer chaos surrounding them and the relaxed and unlimited freedom this world gives them. They rejected sequential action of their predecessors creating effective methods of work suited to their needs, which could be observed during the ACTA case. What kind of people are modern students? I will answer this question referring to D. Tapscott's work, who listed eight qualities of this generation and these are: freedom, customization, thorough observation, credibility, cooperation, entertainment, fast pace, innovation [Tapscot 2010, p. 21].

D. Tapscott notices that *the network generation revels in freedom* [2010, p.141]. It wants to be completely independent and free from all rules and regulations created by their predecessors. It should not be, however, understood as laziness, idleness and neglecting tasks and duties posed by life. They only want the right to choose where, when and how they work, study, do the shopping, contact friends, or have fun. This everyday life style was brought to them by the Internet, which allows them to access any resources at any time or place. Young people do not want to be shut down in offices, schools, houses. They know that their work or learning may be as effective at any place or time since they always have access to the tool they need.

D. Tapscott observed that *the network generation is not satisfied with anything they get – they customize each thing and suit it to their needs* [Tapscot 2010, p. 146]. This happens because of the way children are brought up, which is underlined by the author: *they grew up getting whatever they wanted and whenever they wanted and then they suited it to their needs according to their expectations* [2010, p. 146]. This kind of action led the generation to expressing their personality through adjusting the world to them and not the other way round. Then, we have a choice between education and self-education. No matter whether it is school or work, their action are driven by their needs. They do not want to operate by the old system's rules that offer ready-made solutions.

Nowadays, credibility is a 'strategy' allowing to survive in working places, institutions or politics, etc. One might say that someone who is not credible is out of the game. D. Tapscott stresses that *the network generation cares about credibility – honesty, caring about other people, clarity and fulfilling taken responsibilities. It is also a generation with very high tolerance* [Tapscot 2010, p. 154]. We live in a world of constant change with unlimited access to information from a variety of fields. Economic and cultural success depends on the ability to find reliable sources and passing the knowledge on.

Network generation's natural tendency to cooperate stretches across all spheres of their life [Tapscot 2010, p. 167]. Each day, they participate in a number of message boards,

blogs, forums, online games shared and used by many users at the same time. I agree with M. Castells, who states that *the availability of the source code allows everyone to modify the existing and creating new programs and applications thanks to cooperation and unlimited possibility of sharing technical knowledge* [2003, p. 47]. *Such a global cooperation has extremely high potential but also carries a kind of threat. The Internet on the one hand allows numerous scientists and programmers to cooperate on projects vital for society but on the other hand gives terrorists ability to plot assassinations breaking our everyday life's order.*

Access to the Internet, not limited by time or place, as well as the ability to instantly receive answers to virtually all questions, quick communication and transfer made the network generation get used to the fast pace of life. In addition there is life pressure and the belief that one should not waste any time forces them to be constantly active. The rate of changes happening because of the Internet is perceived as a natural phenomenon.

Summary

Being a member of networking society means to have the ability to use new technologies and media, be critical about the overflow of tools and technical *appliances, it is the ability of finding your place in the new digital reality* [Zamojski 2010, p. 15].

What can we do to effectively connect the new and the old? The networking generation still needs new stimuli. The Internet has a parallel structure and perhaps because of that student's thinking is more parallel than linear. Students can do a variety multiple things at the same time. They read a lot but the content is not uniform and homogenous. They jump from a topic to a topic. Their thought map has a lot of branches. Therefore it seems reasonable to: 1) in micro scale: shorten every lecture to 45 min and make them more frequent at the same time; introduce conversational classes for small groups, I propose creating thematic groups in the Internet concerning school subjects. A tutor or a chosen student may be a moderator of such a group. 2) in macro scale: creating a set of standard information competences of a student – web user.

References

1. Van Dijk J., *Społeczny aspekty nowych mediów*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2010.
2. Castells M., *Galaktyka Internetu, Refleksje nad internetem, biznesem i społeczeństwem*, Dom Wydawniczy Rebis, Poznań 2003.
3. Goban-Klas T*., Media i komunikowanie masowe, Teorie i analizy prasy, radia, telewizji i Internetu*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2004.
4. Bendyk E*., Atymatrix. Człowiek w labiryncie sieci*, Wydawnictwo W.A.B., Warszawa 2004.
5. Wallace P., *Psychologia Internetu,* Dom Wydawniczy Rebis, Poznań 2003.
6. Giddens A., *Nowoczesność i tożsamość*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2007.
7. Czerepaniak–Walczak M., *Aspekty i źródła profesjonalnej refleksji nauczyciela,* Wydawnictwo EDYTOR, Toruń 1997.
9. Eisenberg M.B.A., Big6 Skills Overview [w:] http://www.big6.com/showarticle.php?id=16, dostęp 12.05.2012.
10. *American Association of School Librarians. Information Literacy Standards for Student Learning*, 1998 [w:] http://www.ala.org/ala/aasl/aaslproftools/informationpower/InformationLiteracyStandards _final.pdf., dostęp 12.05.20012.
11. *ACRL Institute for Information Literacy* [w:] http://www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlissues/acrlinfolit/ professactivity/iil/welcome.htm z dnia 12.05.2012.
12. ANZIIL *Australian and New Zealand Institute for Information Literacy* [w:] http://www.anziil.org/ dostęp 12.05.2012.
13. Perzycka E., *Struktura i Dynamika Kompetencji informacyjnych nauczyciela w społeczeństwie sieciowym*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Szczecińskiego, Szczecin 2008.
14. Melosik Z., Szkudlarek T., *Kultura, tożsamość i edukacja: migotanie znaczeń*, Wydawnictwo. Impuls, Kraków 1998.

15. Melosik Z., *Postmodernistyuczne kontrowersje wokół edukacji*, Wydawnictwo Edytor, Poznań 1995.

16. Czerepaniak-Walczak M., *Uwarunkowania procesu kształtowania świadomości krytycznej – perspektywa pedagogiczna* w: *Edukacja całożyciowa. Źródła, doświadczenia, wartości,* red. A. Rella, J. Świrko–Pilipczuk, K. Łuszczek,, Szczecin 2008.

17. Tapscott D., *Cyfrowa dorosłość*, Wydawnictwo Akademickie i Profesjonalne, Warszawa 2010.

18. Wilber K. w pracy *Boomeritis. Powieść, która da ci wolność*, Wydawnictwo Czarna Owca, Warszawa 2010.

19. Castells M*., Galaktyka Internetu*, Dom Wydawniczy Rebis, Poznań 2003.

20. Zamojski P., *Cyberkultura, Syntonia sztuki, nauki i technologii*, Wydawnictwo Poltext, Warszawa 2010.