Essay Contest Entry

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Cyberspace: A New Banana?

Does Internet constitute the next evolutionary step?

Did you know that women, who don't have children don't die? Well, if you didn't know this, let me explain to you why this is the case: Women, who don't have children don't become grandmothers and thus don't die. This question and the answer to it, was given to me by a five year old child during one of my kindergarten years, leaving me fascinated and thinking.

#1   Introduction

Exploring the world, finding explanations for the things that happen around us is the most central need and motivation of our existence, at least in the years after our birth. This process of exploring the world is a fascinating, glorious, profoundly beautiful occurrence and I find that observing children how they go about to understand the world, how they draw conclusions, how they play and experiment with their conclusions, how they build strategies also in their relationship with others is the most impressive spectacle one can experience. Finding our paths when we are born is an experience we adults all already have. I believe the way we learn to learn, the way we explore and perceive relationship patterns along the way creates the basis of who we are, how we perceive political systems, how we participate to create our own live but also to participate in society. I believe that cyberspace is changing the way we live relationships and thus the way we learn, consequently it changes the way we think about ourselves, the way we interact in society. This Essay will offer some thoughts on these ideas.

#2   Exploring the World; About Learning

So, how do we draw conclusions, how do we learn, what are the essential frame works, surroundings, triggers, moments of learning experiences, how do we start forming a picture about ourselves? From what or whom does it depend if I learn and what I learn? I have no answer but some thoughts from my experience as kindergarten teacher and trainer within non-formal education settings.

I believe that learning is a social event, where social relationships have a great deal of influence on how we learn something. For example, if a child learns about a new fruit, sees a

banana for the first time, how will it approach this new object? What determines its interest in this new fruit and the depths of exploration? So first, what is there to learn about a banana? Surely its consistence, smell, taste (but how do we know that I can eat it?), general appearance etc. But also, what is it used for, how is it created, how does it get into my live, is it dangerous, is it empowering, can I use it, why should I deal with it etc.. Will the child go into depths while exploring, opening the banana, smelling the inside, throwing it, testing the weight and robustness, squashing it, eating it, sharing it with others, hiding it, using it as a tool to do something else, creating a game out of it with others, making an overall analysis thus being able to really know and understand what the banana is about, technically but also emotionally?

I believe a child will first of all – subconsciously - examine which relevance the banana has for its reference persons (parents/teachers/close people) and if exploring a banana will change anything in the relationship with them. My experience shows that the motivation to examine the new object highly depends on whether the person who presents it is trust worthy or part of the learner's relationship structure and how the mother or father reacts to this new object. This would mean that testing and analysing the banana is also about whether the person I love likes it or not, if that person lets me deal with the banana the way I want to deal with it, if the person who is in power, also responsible to protect me from weird stuff, can take and support me if I use the banana differently than how they have used it before. I think this pattern in principle does not change with adults by the way, I do think we behave differently when we grow up, but deep inside we function very similarly like when we are born.

So learning about new stuff is a way to understand my relationship with my reference persons. This is essential. So learning about the banana might only be a secondary motivation, as maybe learning about the banana lets me understand my relationship to others, which is maybe why we engage in learning in the first place: Understanding my relationship and role in society as this determines my success, satisfaction or happiness. But also may I draw my own conclusions? Learning about something new is also learning about making my conclusions and about being able to communicate them. What is, if I believe the banana is salty? Try and persuade someone that you think a banana is salty. If Peter F. Drucker claims "for career decisions, self-knowledge has never been more important" than here is how I think it works. The way we establish self-esteem, perceptions about ourselves depend on the relationship patterns and exploration habits that we experience in our early ages.

So, in other words, will we let the child use the banana to peal it and enjoy squashing its toes inside? Here the social bargaining starts, as most teachers will not let a child squash its toes into the banana, as they will claim that food is not to be played with, or rather not to be wasted. Here is where I believe real learning is being influenced. I claim that in this example the real learning out come for the child is that banana is part of a category (food) that I (the child) can not experiment with, that some one else is deciding what categories of stuff (food, non-food, other) there are and that continuing squashing my toes into that banana will have consequences regarding my relationship with this teacher. I, the child, have a conflict. Do I continue researching and enjoying thus risking negative consequences with my teacher or do I stop, enabling a good mood with my teacher but having limited knowledge about the banana. Maybe, to learn what a banana really is, I will take it away from my reference

persons. That is tricky. Because this means that learning for a child foremost means evaluating and making judgements on how far it can go with experimenting without damaging their relationship to the person they are depending on. As long as I am dependent on my mother/father/teacher I might not truly explore the world the way I feel I want to do that. There are children who don't seem to care about relationships and do things anyway, explore regardless of their reference persons advices. Also here, learning is a social strategy.

If the above is true than this means two things: First, learning is dependent on a reference person (parents, teachers etc.) and second learning depends on whether these reference persons dare to let me explore the way I want and are capable of separating care from agreement but also, can they protect me if something goes wrong. Learning seems to be a matter of making judgements in regard to relationships and dependencies. This also implies that learning about rules and power is more a strategic learning than a moral one. This is important when speaking about civic education/political education. We follow rules mostly out of strategic reasons, not out of moral ones. The reason a child doesn't run in the hallway, is not because its dangerous, but because it was forbidden and by breaking that rule it will suffer some sort of punishment. For me this means learning, self perception and perception about the world depend on relationship categories and on levels of hierarchies.

#3   Learning and Cyberspace

Now regarding cyberspace I believe we face an interesting situation regarding the above mentioned. Lets play with this thought and imagine that the banana from above example is now the Internet.

If cyberspace is the banana, a new object a new technology that I want to explore, how will I learn about it, what are the frames and elements that will support or obstruct my motivation? The interesting part of this new "banana" - the Internet – is that it's a different thing to learn about. It's like a banana that I peal and the stuff inside is endless, I can squish my toes in it but I will find no end. One day this banana, this technology will even let me be a banana. Also, it seems to be an object that changes its appearance, once accessed only via grey big desktop computers, now accessed also by little mobile devices, tomorrow maybe through our brain, the day after tomorrow our brain might be inside the net, before bound to modems and cables, now being accessible wirelessly. But also the content is changing from downloading stuff to uploading stuff, from single user to group action. So how to learn about something that is endlessly big, changing appearance and changing function?

In addition, my reference persons seem to know this, have little clue about the Internet and do not know themselves how to deal with it. But they use it, heavily. And here is the great issue about cyber space, lost in digital wonderland. I think we are lost in digital wonderland out of two reasons, first because it is vast, endless and changing, we do not know what it actually is, and second, because we don't know how it will influence our future, our selves, our children. We still live in an era where the common understanding seems to be that the real world is more rewarding and beautifull than the virtual world. The people we learn from do not dare to challenge this. But soon, we will be able to create virtual worlds that will heavily challenge the real world.

How do I learn about a banana that changes between yellow and blue, between soft and hard, between being eatable and poisonous, between source of inspiration and danger, between being given and create? What kind of relationship can I offer to a student wanting to learn about something like the cyberspace? Most likely such an object will be treated with great care. It is being treated with great care when it comes up to children, but most of the times its treated with fear and banning by teachers and parents. If we look at many movies and science fiction stories (The Matrix or Sword Art Online), virtual spaces where we can create the exact world as we dream are wonderfull imaginations. But they depend on a different perception of ourselves, of relationships and of hierarchies.

#4   New Relationships?

I would like to challenge this attitude, not because I think that there are no threats coming from cyberspace and that we naively have to think positively about the digital wonderland, but because internet is changing some paradigms that let us establish new relationship with our children, that let us perceive the world with new means, that creates potentials to empower each and every one of us and finally that let us create a new model of community.

For the first time in human history so many people are able to communicate with so many other people at the same time and for the first time physical boundaries and geographic distances seem not to matter (apart from the digital divide, which is becoming the new hierarchy, which we need to seriously deal with). A so called sharing economy has re-started, people are becoming collaborators, new ideas of benefitting from each other are starting to grow, knowledge transfer will soon not be anymore a question of hierarchy or social status, already now children are sometimes faster than teachers in finding some answers to questions by simply consulting internet tools, power relationships are changing, one might ask, do we finally have the technology and capacity to cooperate rather than compete?

This is naïve of course, but I dare propose this thought: Cyberspace may allow an evolutionary step in regard to human behaviour and relationships with each other.

If that is true, if cyberspace allows new ways of cooperation and of self fulfilment, then teaching and exploring the Internet becomes a whole new story. Cyberspace allows a new relationship between children and parents as learning about it needs the parent to admit that it is something that the parent also is still learning and will never finish learning. This is a fundamental realization, makes parents vulnerable, thus making children aware that the actual learning of what a banana is, is about understanding that my parent is not all mighty, is not all power full and eventually is also just like me, that learning is a lifelong process and that I do not need to lie about this. It is about realizing that learning is not a hierarchical process anymore but a passionate one, where knowledge is being searched by the learner instead of pushed into the same. This is why being lost in digital wonderland is not dangerous as long as I am not alone. This means that also parents should not be alone.

So finding the path in this global knowledge network might all be about not being alone, which is interesting because that's exactly the benefit of the Internet, to not be alone. So I would say that the most important conceptual developments regarding education, also in

early childhood is not to ban a technology but to walk together into this technology, just like on a play ground or learning about a banana, the real danger is not a dangerous toy at the play ground or a possible poison in side the banana, the danger as I see it is being alone with such a threat. Now some of us who are in the educational arena, trying to create learning settings do not deal with eliminating dangers, like creating a playground that has no sharp edges, but rather in preparing people to be able to estimate dangers and to offer knowledge about how to deal with wounds, how to deal with damage.

#5   My Plan

In reality this will mean that I as a kindergarten teacher will use Internet technologies already in kindergarten, I will allow usage of these technologies, support the exploration of it, actually changing the paradigm. This means that I will not teach technologies. The Internet is changing, as its usage is, as it is changing the way we learn. I will learn with children, walk together with them into cyberspace and let them walk with me. I will support children taking pictures, sharing pictures, elaborating videos, sharing such content with Internet technology, creating and contributing to sharing platforms, communicating with such platforms. I will develop concepts that allow group activity with Internet tools, that support joint exploration and reflection opportunities about content and experiences that have been made online. I will use the internet as a tool that creates opportunity to learn about ones self out of own motivation, without hierarchy, without moral obligation, I want to create a positive connotation of cyberspace, but I will go with them, just like on a new playground. I will also demand to do it together and with a clear attitude that makes a great deal of difference between agreement, support and emotions. I might heavily disagree but still support, I might feel angry, but still support. Furthermore finding a path in this global knowledge society means investing into education of teachers and pedagogical staff in general. I will contribute to concepts and get involved in the preparation of future teachers, mentors and facilitators to understand and develop together with them how this change of paradigm can be put into practice in schools of tomorrow.

Finally, if we talk about finding a path within the digital wonderland, it is about not being alone, its about finding collaborators for my ideas and thoughts, its about deconstructing hierarchies, its about a different way of learning, its about changing a paradigm. It is also about taking our children and our teachers out on a new playground that is new to ourselves and that changes each time we go there. As always, dangers and potentials are both there, that's nothing new. What might be new, that now we go there with less hierarchy and more self-determination. We all become learners, we all become sharers, we cooperate, we can achieve what we want with support of like-minded, we move away from owning to sharing, from pretending to being, from teaching to supporting.

That is the new paradigm.