



Digital technology advances are opening up new ways to communicate, with the potential to enhance student–teacher relationships. **Sonia Livingstone** followed a class of London teenagers for a year to find out more about how they are, or in some cases are not, connecting online.

Walk into any classroom today and you'll find a mix of smart phones, tablet computers and smart boards – for reading, viewing, searching, sharing and connecting. Walk into any family home and here too you cannot fail to observe the plethora of screens and other digital paraphernalia.

At school, the ubiquity of digital devices has led educators and policymakers to speculate about how technology in the classroom is transforming the nature of learning and literacy, the relations between students and teacher, and the relevance of curricular knowledge to the wider society.

In the home, discussions are often more anxious, bemoaning the loss of parental authority, fearing the array of risks associated with screen and networked cultures, and nostalgic for social and ethical norms that are under pressure, if not already lost. Yet here too there are excited predictions about new opportunities for children and young people to develop their interests, gain expertise, participate, create and connect.

Indeed, as digital networks increasingly underpin social relationships of all kinds, the logic of the digital age seems to dictate that connection is good and disconnection bad. In our public and private lives, more connections are called for, planned for and celebrated.

For children and young people, the hope is that digital, networked technologies can connect disaffected youth with exciting learning opportunities and marginalised families with once-elite forms of

knowledge, and can refresh schools with the new sources of inspiration and digital literacy called for by the 21st century workplace.

I have recently spent a year, alongside Dr Julian Sefton-Green, with a class of 13- to 14-year-olds at a London secondary school. They came from all kinds of homes, rich and poor, and mirrored the multicultural diversity of the city itself. Our aim was to research an “ordinary” class, because, wonderful though the benefits of the digital age are for the makers and creators, coders and entrepreneurs, campaigners and geeks, we feared that these benefits were not reaching most kids. Rightly, as it turned out.

We began by observing in the classroom, before following the students home for individual and family interviews. Lastly, we explored their connections with friends and peers, and extended family, and in other activities in a range of places, both online and offline. By mapping the connections and disconnections experienced by our class across these everyday settings, we hoped to work out the opportunities before them and the problems or limitations they might be grappling with. Of course I cannot relay all our findings here, so let me tell you one thought-provoking story that took the whole year of fieldwork to unfold.

Offered to the whole year group of some 250 13-year-olds at the start of the year, the World Challenge promised a two-week trip to Malaysia for those who could win the competition to enter and raise the necessary (and sizeable) funds to participate.

The prize was a civic one – to see the rainforest and learn about the lives of people in developing countries – but also promised “an amazing journey of self-discovery”, connecting individual and collaborative activities across school, home, and community, locally and globally, through digital networks.

Around one-third of our class entered the competition, with a seemingly sensible set of decisions resulting in just a handful being selected – all from middle-class homes, mostly white. Here, as often in our fieldwork, we found ourselves as researchers influenced by the claims that society is changing, and yet finding the reproduction online of existing ways of life, and established forms of advantage, to be strong. When this applies to friendship patterns, readers may be relieved that not everything is so different from life a generation ago: for instance, though our class had on average 500 “friends” on Facebook, on average they had just 16 people whom they really cared about or chose to spend time with, often face to face. But when we see social inequalities repeating themselves, we may be less sanguine.

Our interest was in the “digital” dimension of the World Challenge. The participants were meant to connect with each other locally and globally to co-ordinate shared activities and monitor progress. Several digital networks were established to enable this: an email network for the participants and teacher at school; an intranet to record their progress and funds raised; a website to explain about the wider

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Challenge, with forums to network with those in other schools.

Yet we observed a catalogue of minor but telling problems over the year, and for us they exemplified related difficulties of digital technology that we witnessed in classrooms, after-school clubs and efforts to connect school and home. We watched the teacher try to demonstrate the World Challenge website to the students on the day that the school's internet went down. On another day she had forgotten her password. When she posted meeting minutes on the school's intranet, it turned out that the students did not know how to access it. And so on.

This is not to say the project failed – it was successful. But it succeeded as a highly local, largely “offline” effort. The young people met face to face after school to review their progress and discuss the next tasks. They organised fundraising events at school (a parent quiz night, a cake sale, an Easter egg hunt) and in their neighbourhood (babysitting, car washing, bag-packing in an upscale supermarket). Only after they finally got to Malaysia were the photos of the trip delightedly uploaded to Facebook for all to see.

So isn't this the digital age? Well, yes. But the imperative to connect is not as straightforward as often supposed. For, while digital networks can connect home and school, youth and adults, local and global spheres, both teachers and young people have a lot invested in keeping their lives separate, under their own control and away from the scrutiny of the other.

For instance, we suggested to both the teacher and the students that it would be helpful to set up a Facebook group to co-ordinate World Challenge activities. The teacher thought this a good idea, but worried that it would give the students access to her profile, her personal life. Unbeknown to her, however, the students had already set up a Facebook group to co-ordinate themselves, but they didn't want to give a teacher access to their profiles either!

That managing disconnections was a choice rather than, as may be supposed, just incompetence, was most clearly shown by the school's highly effective school information management system. This documented each child's attendance, behaviour and achievement, permitting a detailed tracking of progress and problems to be mined by the teachers. The school was not digitally incompetent; it merely appeared so in its abortive efforts to connect to students, parents and the wider world. Is this a way to maintain its authority? To protect its traditions and fend off proposed alternatives or destabilising innovations?

One might also ask, why didn't the young people take up the invitation to “meet other Challengers” or participate in the World Challenge website (via Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube, Twitter, etc)? Here we need to look at the rest of young people's lives. As parents become increasingly protective, ensuring that they are either at school or at home and not “hanging about” outside or unaccounted for, it may have seemed rather liberating to meet up to bake or knock on neighbours' doors to offer help or even pack bags together in the supermarket. The importance of face-to-face communication has not waned now that other alternatives exist, and young people too can tire of being stuck at home staring at a screen.

Despite this, it cannot be said that nothing much is changing for young people in the digital age. However, although the World Challenge – and other episodes we observed over the year – was undertaken conscientiously and often pleasurably, a critical outside eye must surely note the elements of individualised competition, reproduction of social advantage, lack of digital literacy and missed

opportunities regarding the potential to build creative connections with others. While in part it can be argued that “the kids are alright”, contrary to the many fears and media panics about growing up in the digital age, we should also be concerned that many of its exciting opportunities – to code or geek out, to create or campaign – remain far from the ordinary experience of many young people. ■

This article draws on the work of The Class, conducted with Julian Sefton-Green as part of the Connected Learning Research Network, led by Mimi Ito and funded by The MacArthur Foundation. See clrn.dmlhub.net/projects/the-class and www.parenting.digital



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