

Palgrave Macmillan's Digital Education and Learning

Much has been written during the first decade of the new millennium about the potential of digital technologies to produce a transformation of education. Digital technologies are portrayed as tools that will enhance learner collaboration and motivation and develop new multimodal literacy skills. Accompanying this has been the move from understanding literacy on the cognitive level to an appreciation of the sociocultural forces shaping learner development. Responding to these claims, the **Digital Education and Learning Series** explores the pedagogical potential and realities of digital technologies in a wide range of disciplinary contexts across the educational spectrum both in and outside of class. Focusing on local and global perspectives, the series responds to the shifting landscape of education, the way digital technologies are being used in different educational and cultural contexts, and examines the differences that lie behind the generalizations of the digital age. Incorporating cutting-edge volumes with theoretical perspectives and case studies (single-authored and edited collections), the series provides an accessible and valuable resource for academic researchers, teacher trainers, administrators and students interested in interdisciplinary studies of education and new and emerging technologies.

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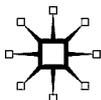
Digital Technologies for School Collaboration

By Anastasia Gouseti

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DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES FOR SCHOOL COLLABORATION

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For Nicholas

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Preface

As a high-school student on a small Greek island in the early-nineties I spent my childhood and adolescence living entirely offline. I have faint memories of being taught how to use a Word processor at my school's sole computer lab but nothing more than that. Concepts such as instant messaging and Skyping, social networking, and smartphones were unheard if not sci-fi scenarios of a nonexistent reality. Still, some of our teachers—mainly the foreign-language ones—made honest attempts to bring a sense of multiculturalism into the classroom by adopting the use of a range of Teaching English as a Foreign Language resources and tools such as tape and video recordings, the Penguin Young Readers, foreign magazines and newspapers, and so on. We were able to catch a glimpse of the everyday lives of children in the United Kingdom and we were surprised when we watched videos of children going to school wearing uniforms and ties. We learned to recognize the Big Ben and the London Bridge landmarks and sang along to the lyrics of “The Wheels on the Bus” despite the poor sound quality of the recording coming out of what is now considered to be a vintage cassette player. And when our teacher of English suggested getting a pen pal from a foreign country some of us jumped at the opportunity and paid the fee for registering with the agency. Opportunities to link with schools abroad were the exception rather than the rule and the prospect of online collaboration and real-time communication with pupils abroad was unthinkable.

Twenty years later, digital technology has become a familiar element of most aspects of modern life and digital media are now an indispensable feature of most children and young people's leisure-time activities. The use of digital technology has also become a significant component of many forms of teaching and learning. The broader changes in the nature, characteristics, and conditions of digital technologies have led to enthusiastic claims about the potential of the new tools to transform educational practices and

processes. In particular, the collaborative and convivial nature of the second wave of “social media” that emerged throughout the 2000s has brought about an enthusiasm that the Internet has created greater opportunities for online school linking and collaboration.

The use of digital technologies is seen to not only provide learners access to a wealth of online information but it can also offer both teachers and students a ready means of communicating with peers at the global level. For instance, claims are often made that students can now benefit more from collaborative practices and form online learning communities with their peers abroad. Moreover, a large number of schools can now boast of having up-to-date computer labs, superfast wireless Internet connection, and laptop carts. All in all, participation in collaborative projects appears to provide a means of promoting global awareness and understanding, improving digital competence, supporting mobility and intercultural learning, enhancing foreign-language skills, sharing expertise and good practices, and many more.

Throughout the course of my academic research I have been both excited and dismayed by the educational potential of digital technologies and web-based school collaboration. On the one hand, I feel excited because I think that there is potential for digital technologies to enhance students’ online collaborative practices and offer them opportunities to link with peers abroad and form friendships in a safe online environment. I believe that taking part in a collaborative project can foster cultural links, surpass geographical barriers, open up the classroom, and help teachers and students engage in a wider community of schools. Yet, I am dismayed, because most of the educational discussions regarding school collaboration still focus on deterministic claims that it is the technologies that possess inherent qualities to transform schooling rather than the *ways* teachers and students engage with them. Also, despite the large amounts of funding the area of web-based school collaboration has attracted and the plethora of available programs that has emerged, little research has so far been conducted to explore the issue in depth.

In writing this book I wanted to look at the complex issue of school collaboration and develop rich understandings of the everyday realities of web-based collaborative projects. I also wanted to gain an insight into teachers’ and students’ experiences from their participation in online collaborative programs and develop a realistic perspective of the range of challenges they face. As such, this book is not a technical guide concerned with “how to” make the best use of digital technology for school collaboration. Instead, this book attempts to capture the “wider picture” of web-based school collaboration and focuses on the people, conditions, and practices that underlie its successful implementation in formal educational settings. In particular,

this book aims to identify the host of technological and nontechnological issues that underpin the success of web-based school collaboration and look at the people, policies and other processes, and factors that can shape collaborative environments. This book has been written for anyone interested in the complex albeit exciting world of online school collaboration. All in all, it is hoped that it will inspire readers to look beyond the hype of digital technology use and think more critically about the forms web-based school collaboration might take in the near future.

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