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Youth empowerment through the creation of i-docs: Educational and social impacts

ABSTRACT

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) are key elements in the educa-tional process of teens. Consequently, efforts should be made to integrate ICT into educational plans and policies. Based on this premise, HEBE has been launched – a study on youth empowerment that was funded by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness and carried out by five universities: the University of Girona, the Autonomous University of Madrid, the Autonomous University of Barcelona, the University of Barcelona and Pompeu Fabra University. The project, based on media literacy and transmedia skills, involves the creation of an interactive documentary (i-doc). The HEBE i-doc: digital prints relates the experi-ences and reflections during the maturation stage of six youngsters with different cultural, educational, family and social backgrounds and profiles. This exploration was carried out through their own audio-visual creations, in a life story format. The i-doc has the dual purpose of (1) devising a methodology based on digital ethnography, and (2) creating an interactive platform for sharing experiences and promoting the visibility of these issues via citizen science.

1. INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXTUALIZATION

Since the 1970s, the term *empowerment* has been generically applied to differ-ent disciplines. In various descriptions of the term, contextual factors in both education and training of the individual have been considered as critical for personal growth. The place in which the individual develops, his/her economic status and access to education, as well as circumstantial character features are all decisive in his/her development (Jennings et al. 2006). The resources and tools available to each person are crucial for facilitating full empower-ment in the life story of each individual (Luttrell and Quiroz 2009). However, the acquisition and provision of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is not sufficient; 'it is important to go further and promote opportunities for developing skills in critically reading, analysing, understanding, evaluating, creating, producing and participating in media' (Scolari 2018a: 27). ICT must be accompanied by educational policies, strategies and pedagogical aims that promote active and passive empowerment mechanisms that help to create spaces and contacts that are enabling for their users.

The active empowerment mechanisms can be defined as those that involve the creative use of new technologies, thus producing an empirical-practical learning process. The passive ones, meanwhile, are the mechanisms that enable the individual to receive another person's creative experiences, often via social media, and through these experiences to examine a series of aspects that also help to facilitate a kind of learning that is both experiential and observational. Both create asymmetric relationships between users with different levels of digital and non-digital empowerment (Fortunati 2014). The two different mechanisms create an ecosystem based on the production and the consumption of new technologies, this phenomenon is usually known as *prosumption* (Ritzer et al. 2012). *Prosumption* encourages learning about the technique, the method, the content and the use of technologies by bringing further opportunities to citizens in the future. Likewise, it enables the indi-vidual to reflect in greater depth on his/her own experience by means of a self-assessment exercise. Several educational projects are based on the use of media and ICT to elaborate on a person's skills and/or to offer avenues for personal growth, critical thought and civic integration. In the present article, we will examine the case study of the HEBE i-doc: digital prints (2017).

The HEBE project consists of an interuniversity and interdisciplinary research study carried out by the University of Girona (the project leader), the Autonomous University of Barcelona, the University of Barcelona, the Autonomous University of Madrid and Pompeu Fabra University, and funded by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness during the period 2014–17, with a second tranche of funding from 2018 to 2021 (focused on analysis of youth empowerment from the perspective of education profession-als). This is a multidimensional project that examines the spaces, moments and processes involved in developing youth empowerment, with the aim of

designing specific policies and initiatives that can be transferred to the general public (Soler et al. 2017). In the current article, emphasis will be placed on the results of one of the lines of research implemented: the creation of an interactive documentary that bears the same title as the research study – HEBE (webdoc.projectehebe.com/) – and in which the primary actors are six young Spaniards and their respective stories of empowerment.

In academic literature, the term *empowerment* is sometimes linked to the processes of media literacy and studies youngsters' behaviour in the way they use media (Scolari 2016). It also carries out a critical assessment of different aspects and their respective content and encourages the creation and co-creation of new content with the aim of promoting citizen inclusion and fostering a well-informed society, as well as reducing the risk of exclusion from community life. This co-creation is encouraged through the promotion of the collaboration between users that meet similar needs, in order to create a sort of online community and newer forms of socialization. While is challenging, it provokes alive, dynamic and discursive experiences between this new community (Ind and Coates 2013). One of the many media literacy initiatives is *Photovoice*, a participative research process through which 'people can identify, represent and enhance their community through a specific photographic technique' (Wang and Burris 1997: 369). The method is based, firstly on giving cameras to members of a specific community to describe their day-to-day lives in a visual form and identify via photographs the aspects on which individual and/or collective intervention should be implemented. This process of visualization is followed by a second one of verbalization and group discussion of the photographs taken to carry out specific actions. Through these three steps – viewing, discussing and acting – researchers can analyse the context and offer critical dialogue in order to find a solution to the community's most tangible problems at the different levels of empowerment: personal, contextual and collective (Lawrence Jacobson 2006). The *Photovoice* project was successfully applied in projects linked mainly with public health (Catalani and Minkler 2010), though it has also been used as the basis for other initiatives, in conjunction with ICT, in environments of political violence, discrimination, language barriers and diasporas (Wagg 2004; Wang et al. 2004; Wang 2006). *Photovoice* provides the user with an instrumental-learning process, critical thought and self-analysis through photographs.

The socio-pedagogical contribution of a methodology like *Photovoice* or even a similar research called *YES!* (Wilson et al. 2007), based on creating links between youngsters and their community (citizenship learning), is the basis for the HEBE research into youth empowerment. Nevertheless, it is important for our final objective to stress that the HEBE project consists of three prior methodological stages:

1. Reviewing the academic literature on the conceptualization of the term *empowerment* through an exhaustive analysis of the existing bibliography (Úcar et al. 2016).
2. Identifying empowerment indicators (spaces, moments and processes) by means of four participative assessments. These indicators were extracted from the bibliography, compared, validated and supplemented by the relating of six life stories of youngsters (Llena et al. 2017).
3. Using questionnaires to determine the levels of empowerment among youngsters.

By completing these three stages, an interactive documentary on youth empowerment was created as a part of a process of *art-based research* (McNiff 2008). This specific practice was chosen with a dual aim. On the one hand, design a participative research methodology on youth empowerment through the use of ICT. On the other hand, create an interactive platform. Both were applied to share empowerment experiences and help exchange practices to prove online participation skills (Ito et al. 2010).

Below we examine the HEBE interactive documentary as a tool that facilitates the deployment of digital and artistic co-creation skills, but also as a resource for the growth and personal empowerment of youngsters, both individualized and collective. So in a sense, it consists of co-creating personalized and innovating practices that promote a continuous dialogue based on various experiences that suit the online context (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004), but also within the off-line environment (Aitamurto 2013).

2. METHODOLOGY AND MATERIALS: THE HEBE I-DOC: DIGITAL PRINTS AS A TOOL FOR RESEARCH AND TRAINING

The term 'i-doc' or 'interactive documentary' is used to define 'any project that starts with an intention to document the "real" and that uses digital interactive technology to achieve this intention' (Aston et al. 2012: 125). In the case of HEBE, it is explicitly deployed within the sphere of pedagogy and social communication. HEBE is presented as a methodology for analysing the concept of empowerment and as a tool for training the documentary's primary actors, whether they are active individuals or simply users of the platform. The result is a virtual space that contains the accounts of six youngsters, created by themselves, and in which they speak about how they believe they have been empowered during their childhood and adolescence, bearing in mind the theoretical indicators (spaces, moments and processes) deriving from the academic study of the term.

Meanwhile, a qualitative approach using digital ethnography is applied to the process of creating the six youngsters' accounts. This kind of study as suggested by Scolari:

> Contains a set of research methods and techniques that enable researchers to gain a deeper understanding of what people in any given situation do, what matters to them, how they create meaning, how they feel, what they imagine and hope for, and what their sensorial and perceptive experiences of that specific context might be.
>
> (2018a: 115)

The ethnographic approach that we present in this article is based on visual anthropological theory and specifically seeks to base itself on sensorial and emotional aspects (Pink 2015) linked to digital media, the surrounding experience and the environments that are created (Pink et al. 2016). This approach views digital technology as something broader and uses visuals as a way of accessing feelings, connections, materialities and contextual configurations (Pink et al. 2016). Accordingly, digital ethnography is suitable for researching the transmedia processes used in the HEBE i-doc: digital prints, since it is based on revealing experiences and accounts of minorities, as well as the sensorial, emotional and habitual elements of everyday life usually hidden to others.

Based on digital ethnography, HEBE focused on producing an original methodological instrument, the initial purpose of which was to set up a pedagogical audio-visual workshop that would provide the six young participants with the necessary tools to envisage their empowerment experiences from an audio-visual perspective. Our aim was to combine technical training with the expression of images and sounds (Bergala 2016). During the nine sessions of the workshop, situations took place that resulted in such actions as observation, participation and collaboration (Scolari 2018a). These actions are all typical of a more traditional kind of ethnography, and resulted in the following materials and data analysis:

1. The events were filmed during the process of creating the six youngsters' audiovisual pieces: the participants exchanged empowerment experiences through accounts that they created in parallel, with the support of a supervisory team.
2. The researchers' comments and impressions about empowerment, as well as the observations of young educators and youth policy professionals, were expressed after having viewed the six youngsters' audiovisual pieces. These results were also included in the filming of a focus group.
3. Some audiovisual materials and sketches screened before the production of the audiovisual pieces guided the creation process. HEBE places emphasis on documentary formats that involve expressing one's own voice, such as video diaries, video letters or audiovisual essays of an intimate and personal nature.

(Nahum 2006: 85; Weinrichter 2007)

The audio-visual pedagogical workshop sessions geared towards producing scripts for the youngsters' pieces, focusing on the three main indicators under analysis at the theoretical level: processes, spaces and moments of personal learning. However, some of these concepts were difficult to portray in film given their abstract condition, the short duration of the pieces and the participants' lack of experience. Consequently, these elements were replaced by three other equivalent features, which would make the filmic narration more effective. The concept of space was maintained, but the aspect of processes was substituted by a self-portrait piece, and the concept of moments was replaced by a description of the youngster's role model in terms of their empowerment.

In short, the methodology suggested for the pedagogical workshop aimed for a theoretical-practical learning approach devised to develop several aspects:

1. Analytical elements of filmic accounts.
2. Technical elements for creating audio-visual pieces.
3. Elements of critical thought and self-reflection.

To develop these three skills, the sessions were structured into nine stages:

Stage 1 – The game rules: the youngsters had to tackle the project's initial challenge, which involved conceptualizing empowerment and describing it in three-minute audio-visual pieces complying with the indicators above.

Stage 2 – So, how did you become empowered?: this involves talking and discussing in group about how each of the youngsters became empowered to make decisions without implying this maturing under an effect of *adultism* or predominance of adults over youngsters (Gong and Wright 2007). Using dialogue, a collective way of thinking is thus constructed, unmediated by technology and without any artistic construction involved.

Stage 3 – The emotion of images: a selection of short filmic pieces were presented as guidelines for the youngsters from an artistic and a personal narrative perspective. The purpose was to forge a connection between the occurrence of events in their lives and their experiences of empowerment and help them define and express.

Stage 4 – Framing the other: the process consists of filming each other in pairs, to make the youngsters exercise not only their own authorial, critical gaze but also the gaze of the other. At the same time, this reflection on otherness is also developed passively, as the object of external scrutiny.

Stage 5 – Listening to the world: this workshop focuses on all the aspects that have to do with ambient sound, music and words. The voice-off acquires a particular importance when it comes to building the i-narratives that will be structuring the accounts in the interactive documentary. To that end, we work with the youngsters on mechanisms for developing their accounts through words and sound.

Stage 6 – Sharing their first images and sounds of empowerment: halfway through the workshop, we screen the youngsters' first attempts at explaining their process of empowerment. The purpose of this sharing is to help the youngsters build a critical discourse with respect to their own work, at the same time as it provides them with a certain distance to judge what they have produced in terms of a process of personal and artistic reflection. Likewise, group discussion fosters the inclusion of other creative ideas and teaches the youngsters to be tolerant of criticism, as well as to modulate the way they express their own judgements on others' work.

Stage 7 – Images and sounds of empowerment: this stage coincides with the process of producing the pieces, in which the youngsters work on an autonomous piece for six months. While they are given freedom to work as they wish, the HEBE project team is hands-on throughout the process, offering support to the youngsters in terms of conceptual and technical development.

Stage 8 – Reflection and discussion of the images and sounds of empowerment: when the youngsters have completed their pieces, a group viewing stage commences in which the youngsters' reactions are filmed as they comment on their own pieces and those of their fellow participants. They react spontaneously to their own experiences as if they were others' experiences, and an emotional link is established with the others' works, on both a personal and an artistic level.

Stage 9 – Sharing empowerment experiences: the participants carry out a joint reflection in a focus group format, and the results are shown to an audience made up of the youngsters' friends and

family, experts in empowerment policy and academics. The result is a sharing experience that enhances the impressions produced during the different stages of execution of the documentary pieces.

The above stages – which are based on a strategy of formal training via learning-by-doing, narrative or technical problem-solving, imitation or simulation of works of reference and self-critical assessment of the pieces – all help to establish a process of transmedia literacy, as we will explain below.

3. THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE INTERFACE

To demonstrate how the general public can interact with the content created by the six youngsters, we must look at the nodal structure of the interface. The term 'interface' is used here in accordance with the concept of the theory of Carlos A. Scolari who employs the term not only from a graphic and digital perspective, but also as an interaction space in which information and actions circulate and where different technologies engage in dialogue (Scolari 2018b). Concerning this research, the following factors have combined and interwoven in different fields and environments to give rise to the system that characterizes the HEBE i-doc: digital prints interface: (1) images have become the main form of expression and communication for teens and young people; (2) digital technology makes it possible, first, to audio-visually document reality without any need for a great financial outlay, and second, to deploy this documented reality interactively in such a way that the user can choose the contents that interest him/her most, enhancing them where necessary, sharing them with other users and producing his/her own content and (3) the introduction into the field of academic research using new methodologies which, on one hand, incorporate citizen knowledge, and on the other, use new audio-visual languages as their subject matter. The confluence of these three factors lies at the creative heart of the HEBE i-doc: digital prints and reveals the format's potential as a research tool and a youth empowerment methodology – both of which are bolstered by the fact that the interface's nuclear nodes are related to the three indicators of youth empowerment. However, these three factors are not presented simultaneously to the user, instead they are arranged in a consecutive, organized manner, to create an account that coincides with a developing experience of learning about empowerment and, at the same time, of examining the actual empowerment process. In this way, the sequential levels used to organize the screen and lay down navigability guidelines through the i-doc are as follows: first level: a teaser presentation of HEBE and the initiative that the user is about to access, second level: 'Self-portrait' section, third level: 'Space' section and fourth level: 'Person' section.

Each of the latter three levels also contains:

- An introductory piece summarizing the different accounts the user can view and some of the concepts for reflection linked with the youngsters' pieces.
- The six young participants' audio-visual pieces.
- A series of recommendations in the form of brief extracts from the focus groups filmed during the process of the pieces creation and linked with the video the user has just watched.
- A space for participation where the user can share their own empowerment experience.

Personal factors	Interpersonal factors
-Awareness and self-knowledge	-People
-Self-construction and multiplicity of self	-Mentors
-Self-representation	-Family
-Reinterpretation	-Friends
Contextual factors	**Experiential factors**
-Spaces	-Maturity
-Moments	-Memories
-New technologies	-Goals
-Work	-Challenges
-Leisure	-Dreams and aspirations
-Creation and art	-Victories
-Education	-Failures
-Freedom	-Decisions
-Urban space	-Adaptation and resilience
-Identity and origin	-Ability to overcome problems
-Youth policies	-Courage
-Economy and policy	-Emancipation
-Interculturality	-Critical incidents
	-Loss or lack
	-Paternalism and interventionism
	-Transfer of power

Table 1: Factors and terms.

Transmedia literacy skills	Skills associated with the HEBE i-doc: digital prints
Production skills	Digital skills (creating and modifying written and audio pieces, using tools for filming and editing photographic and video compositions).
Management skills	Ability (at a social level) to communicate to the public through the dissemination of content. At the individual level, critical capacity, self-management of one's own identity, emotions and feelings; research skills.
Performative skills	Ability to adapt to rules laid down for producing pieces with regard to subject matter, resources, format, etc.
Media and technology skills	Ability to select the most suitable technology for producing the pieces and the ideal media for participating in the i-doc as a user.
Narrative and aesthetics skills	Ability to achieve digital storytelling (aesthetic ideas, visual composition and narrative features).
Skills involving risk prevention, ideology and ethics	Communicative skills (highlighting intercultural and interdisciplinary diversity).

Table 2: Transmedia skills and skills associated with the HEBE i-doc: digital prints.

Learning through skills	
Conceptual learning (knowing how to do)	Mastery of technologies, procedures, strategies and methods
Procedural learning (knowing how to be)	Attitudes, values, ethics and social, personal and professional skills
Attitudinal learning (knowing how to know)	Knowledge, actions, concepts and principles

Table 3: Learning through skills.

The extracts above from the focus group are included in a specific section of the i-doc called the 'reflection archive'. This section is a heterogeneous space of materials that include video capsules grouped together according to subject tags. They are essentially organized by the following three criteria:

1. Coincidence and repetition when defining the aspects that help to specify the concept of empowerment.
2. Enhancement and consolidation of the aforementioned indicators (spaces, moment/persons and processes/self-portraits).
3. Meta-linguistic and meta-descriptive components with regard to addressing the process of generating and manifesting the empowering experiences, as well as documenting the route followed for developing the reflection on which the HEBE project is based.

The architecture deriving from this organization highlights different thematic associations in syntagmatic clusters, which, for reasons of coherence with the narration and usability in the localization of pieces, are deployed via a wide variety of terms, from references to specific names to extracts from declarations. However, at the level of conceptual design, the reflection archive proposal is structured in accordance with the following terms:

Based on the HEBE i-doc: digital prints interface structure, we can observe the innovative essence of the design, framed as it is within new forms of literacy among teens and young people who have evolved from what we might call a media environment to a transmedia environment. To do so, we have used the international research project *Transmedia Literacy* (2015–18: H2020 ICT 31) and, more specifically, one section of the project's results, included in *Teens, Media and Collaborative Cultures. Exploiting Teens' Transmedia Skills in the Classroom* (Scolari 2018a). The section summarizes six skills acquired by teens and young people through the application of practices in the classroom that involve producing, sharing and consuming media. That can be summarized as a range of skills: production, management, performance, media and technology, narrative and aesthetics and, finally, risk prevention, ideology and ethics. To illustrate the results of this research project, we have collated these six transmedia skills with the competences acquired by the participants and users of the HEBE i-doc: digital prints during the course of its different stages: from the learning phase in the pedagogical audio-visual workshop to the creation of content in the form of audio-visual pieces, to navigability via the platform.

Based on these transmedia skills applied to HEBE, three types of learning can be identified that we define according to different traditions or paradigms (behavioural, functionalist, constructivist and systemic-complex).

These types of learning correspond to different stages of the workshop: attitudinal learning to stages 1, 2 and 3; procedural learning to stages 4, 5 and 6 and finally, conceptual learning to stages 7, 8 and 9.

In short, producing the i-doc enables us not only to present the work as a space for dissemination among the general public, but also to promote a productive, creative interaction that allows us to trace the process experienced by the youngsters and to open up a space for public debate and thus to enhance the visibility of the subject areas addressed previously.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The transmedia literacy that is used is expressed in an asymmetrical, multidirectional manner among the young participants of the HEBE i-doc: digital prints, given that they have received a digital, procedural and attitudinal training, as well as recounting their own personal experiences and creating stories and accounts that have a distinct narrative and aesthetic fecundity. This training based on digital storytelling gives a different experience to each visitor of the interactive platform. In their case, as passive users, they simply wish to make a personal reflection – a type of learning that is solely attitudinal. This becomes clear if we bear in mind the analysis of what the pieces express in relation to the three indicators of youth empowerment, understanding it as an active continuous process over time (Tromp 2007; Betancor 2011).

When the six young participants watched the 'self-portrait audio-visual' piece, a certain effect of distancing took place. They observed themselves as another person and they could critically think about their position, convictions and personality. This perspective towards themselves and their stories allowed interesting considerations about how the youngsters approached the narrative of their own empowerment at the moment of filming and how they perceived it once explained. Some contradictions between both moments emerged here and the participants pointed out the lack of accuracy of language when talking about such a complex process, but the help of image and sound to concrete what empowerment were for them. By questioning and inviting to think about their own productions, a transmedia literacy mechanism occurred, not just about the technical use of the audio-visual, but about the possibilities of media when addressing some specific issues. Alternatively, there is also in the result a media literacy learning process among the documentary users. It does not come from the procedures to create filmic stories, since this skill is taken for granted. Instead, the i-doc offers a set of skills based on the reflection about the content and the term *empowerment,* and the manners to express it.

As we watch the pieces, we can observe that there is a predominance of private portraits, with great depth of personal exploration of the participants' characteristics through their origins.

Furthermore, archive images of the primary actors often appear, evoking their childhood experiences, and contrasted with the present moment.

Meanwhile, the 'portrait' pieces (moments of empowerment) foster a transformative education that encourages us to view the youngsters and their diversity as agents of change in the community to which they belong. By analysing the different audio-visual pieces in which the primary actors have voluntarily portrayed people who are close to them, we can deduce that there is a debt-of-life connection between the HEBE primary actors and the people they see as having empowered them (Salvadó et al. 2017). To that end (and as in the previous case), they turn to creating personal portraits that help them to express as honestly as possible.

Finally, as for the 'space' pieces (empowerment spaces), places of training and education, residence, coexistence and labour and professional development all feature interchangeably. Even though the six participants could not represent a sample significant enough to objectify the data, the case study confirms a tendency to highlight spaces that are institutional and formal in nature, at the expense of spaces used by the youngsters in a more spontaneous, uncontrolled way, for entirely fun-based purposes. Revealingly, the spaces once again impose themselves over time: the places selected are spaces that mean or have meant something to the participants, apart from for emotional reasons, due to their chronological location and their range and extension. Their fecundity is rooted not just in the enabling nature of the space, but also in the dialogue the space offers with the present moment.

Thanks to the navigability via the interface's three nodes, it fosters sociocultural learning for the general public and highlights the potential social impact that the interactive documentary format can have when used for research. Autobiographical imagination used for life stories (Feixa 2018) takes on a new perspective when we introduce participation and sharing of content between teens. The types of autobiographical materials used by social sciences – crossed narrative, novel, film, anti-biography, etc. (Feixa 2018) – can be combined in one single interactive space that is converted into a forum for exchanging empowerment experiences, which transcend the sphere of academia.

The structure of the pedagogical audio-visual workshop sessions is designed for small groups of youngsters, which could be a limiting factor. The exchange of experiences and group discussions must be carried out between eight and ten participants to ensure that work dynamics function correctly. Though the educational opportunity offers excellent potential in terms of many skills for the labour and academic market, currently, it can only be implemented in small groups of young people.

In conclusion, we should point out that HEBE is a project that has spread beyond the academic setting due to its considerable social impact. The characteristics of the i-doc can be used in different environments among adolescents and young people, and it can be applied in academic institutions, associations and organisations working on youth empowerment. The use of citizen science as a user participation instrument is responsible for this success. Given the existing need to explore the viewpoint of professionals who work with teens in their respective empowerment processes, a second project is currently being developed that focuses on the viewpoint of educators.

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