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Mobile storytelling and informal education in a suburban area: a qualitative study on the potential of digital narratives for young second-generation immigrants

Maria Ranieri\textsuperscript{a} and Isabella Brunin\textsuperscript{b}

\textsuperscript{a}Department of Educational Sciences, and Cultural and Training Processes, University of Florence, Vial Laura 48, Florence 50121, Italy; \textsuperscript{b}Department of Communication and Social Research, University La Sapienza, Rome, Italy

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The article discusses an action-research study focused on developing participatory attitudes and the self-expression skills of a group ($N = 15$) of second-generation immigrant adolescents who live in an urban suburb in Italy. The research study was based on mobile storytelling, a practice of personal multimedia storytelling conducted through mobile devices in connection with social networking services. The findings reveal that encouraging certain uses of the media can have positive effects on the expression of identities and collaborative practices, particularly for marginalised groups. At the same time, a certain laconicism and misspelling tends to characterise the mobile stories created by the teens, which reveals their difficulties in linguistic communication. From this perspective, it is evident that the use of digital media can reinforce pre-existing divisions and therefore there is now a need for public education to play a more active role in balancing inequalities with the development of technical, social and linguistic skills.

Keywords: new media literacies; participation; second-generation youth; digital storytelling; mobile phones

Introduction

The world we live in is always becoming more connected, due to the widespread use of mobile devices and social media (Castells et al. 2007). Mobile phone penetration in developed countries has reached the saturation point, while in developing countries it remains buoyant (ITU 2011). The enthusiasm for mobile and social technologies seems to be particularly high among young people. In the USA, the majority of teens (75\%) own cell phones, using them to interact with friends and engage in a range of activities (Lenhart, Ling, and Campbell 2010). Social network sites (SNS) are becoming dominant with 80\% of teens now using Facebook or MySpace.
A similar picture is also emerging in Europe, as revealed by the EU Kids Online study (Livingstone, Olafsson, and Staksrud 2011). In Italy, almost all (91.8%) the young people are familiar with SNSs and a large number of teens are on Facebook (88.5%). Also, mobile phones are very popular: in 2011, 67.3% of 6–17-year-olds used cell phones and 56.4% have their own phone. They use mobile phones to connect to SNS, to send texts, and to take and share pictures (ISTAT 2011).

These statistics reveal that those media are widely spread among young people. However, this does not necessarily mean that the younger generations are aware users of the media. There is a growing consensus among researchers that it is time now to stop the fashionable ‘facile enthusiasm’ for the participatory potential of social and new media, particularly in education. Indeed, there are no amazing opportunities which automatically change into reality just by providing people with new forms of technology (Selwyn 2011). So, even though mobile phones and SNS have become so popular, we cannot presume that teenagers are using them creatively and responsibly. Data show that teenagers are generally not conscious of the risks related to the use of media (Buckingham 2007; Turkle 2011). In particular, participatory culture (Jenkins 2009) requires technical and social competence, as well as awareness of one’s own identity.

The action-research project presented here was aimed at developing social and new media literacy skills in a group of Italian adolescents within the context of informal education. It was based at Piagge, a working-class neighbourhood of Florence, characterised by a large number of children born in immigrant families. In Italy, from 2003 to 2008, the immigrant population aged 0–17 increased by 109.1% and started entering Italian schools (MIUR-ISMU 2011). Notwithstanding, their hold back rate is higher than the rate of Italian students, and this divide seems doomed to grow all through their educational careers. They cannot fully develop their social and linguistic skills in the compulsory education cycle, with negative consequences for their integration.

With this in mind, the project intended to empower these children and improve their participatory attitudes, playing on the use of popular media such as cell phones and social networks. Teenagers were engaged in a storytelling activity as a way to develop their skills of self-expression and self-representation.

Prior to describing the research study, we shall provide an overview of its theoretical background.

**Theoretical framework**

*Participatory culture, new media literacies and engagement 2.0*

Although the concept of participation has acquired a number of different meanings in the recent literature on new media (Merchant 2009), we will focus on Jenkins’ definition of participatory culture as one in which members ‘believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connection with one another’ (Jenkins 2009, xi). Jenkins argues that new media have redefined
the concept of literacy with a shift of focus from individual to social skills, referred to as ‘new media literacies’. A huge corpus of theoretical and empirical studies on the new literacies prompted by the so-called ‘digital turn’ has been produced in the last decade (Mills 2010). Despite their differences, several scholars emphasise that developing new media literacies requires a critical review of key issues such as identity, privacy, copyright, credibility, and participation and allows young people the opportunity to be involved in new types of civic engagement (James 2009).

Young citizens are mostly excluded from the public discourses of policy arenas. As a result, the political world seems to be distant to many of them, and they seek for other forms of social participation. Young people do not recognise the traditional notion of civic engagement and their forms of citizenship are based on networked activism (Bennett 2008). Pettingill (2008) has created the expression ‘Engagement 2.0’ to indicate this new version of civic engagement through Web 2.0. But engagement 2.0 is not just another word for participatory culture. As Pettingill (2008, 13) argues, ‘Participatory culture fertilises the seeds of engagement in novel ways, and engagement, in turn, shapes participatory culture. In other words, participatory culture is a democratic practice in itself’.

Identity, self-representation and digital storytelling

From the perspective of engagement 2.0, active participation in public spaces entails the existence of subjects capable of managing their self-representation in relationships with others. The issue of participation is combined here with that of identity.

The ability to create and manage virtual identities has been seen as an opportunity to explore subjectivity, despite the risk of self’s fragmentation or disconnection between online and real experience (Turkle 2011). In this context, digital media becomes interesting on an educational level for the opportunity they offer to young people to communicate themselves and explore their identities (Buckingham 2007).

Young people’s identity can be expressed in digital production, which includes both explicit personal narratives, such as digital storytelling (Lundby 2008), and all forms of remixing and mash-ups (Lessig 2008). Also, blogs and SNS are becoming rich environments for self-presentation, entailing a bricolage of interpersonal communication, biographical writing and sharing of contents (Papacharissi 2011). Lastly, mobile devices are now refining the ability to track life in real time, through ubiquitous connectivity, multimedia functions and geolocation services (Castells et al. 2007).

Mobile technology as an educational and inclusive resource

Mobile devices can be seen as educational and inclusive resources. Recent studies have analysed their potential in the context of formal and informal learning
Some scholars have emphasised the access to information and people ‘anywhere anytime’. Others have focused on the notion of ‘context’ as mobile devices enable access to resources within authentic daily life situations.

Other research have investigated the relationship between the use of ‘textese’ (i.e., an abbreviated form of language used in texting, instant messaging, etc.) and literacy (Kemp 2011). For example, Coe and Oakhill (2011) analysed the impact of textese on reading skills and found a positive relationship between reading skills and children’s ability to produce and decipher textese.

The existing literature also stresses the fact that cell phones can be effective tools even for children and young people who live in disadvantaged contexts, especially when there are scarce educational resources outside school (Kim 2009). Indeed, today low-cost mobile devices can store great amount of data, thus enabling access to online resources even in disadvantaged contexts.

Research context and methodology

The project was carried out in Piagge, a low-income district of Florence, which contains a considerable number of young people who are at risk of social exclusion. Since 2008, an after-school service for youngsters has been promoted by the local community of volunteers, the Piagge’s Base Community, with the financial support of the Municipality of Florence. The service consists of different educational activities that are delivered within the R.eTe program (i.e., young people [R. = ragazzi, it. trans.] and [e, it. trans] the neighbourhood [Te = territorio, it. trans]).

Participants

The group of teens consisted of 15 people aged 11–15. The socio-economic status of the participants’ families was low, with many single parent families. The low educational background of parents affects children’s literacy, since they do not speak Italian at home, and they learn Italian grammar at school.

The group of educators was made up of six adults, who played different roles according to Donnay and Charlier’s terminology (2002): four educators (who acted as ‘praticien réfléchi’ or ‘acteur-chercheur’), an outside researcher (a media educator, who acted as a ‘chercheur-acteur’) and an external researcher (who played the role of a ‘chercheur académique’).

Intervention

The intervention was carried out in 2011 and was based on a 2-month workshop on mobile storytelling, a subset of ‘digital storytelling’, conducted through
mobile devices in connection with SNS. Digital storytelling was used in California in the late 1980s to connect communities through stories. Nowadays, it is adopted for educational purposes as a technique to produce multimedia narratives (Clarke and Adam 2012).

The workshop included six meetings of two hours, with a break of one week in the middle. Initially, participants were asked to use their cell phones to take pictures and videos of themselves, their families and their neighbourhood, as a starting point for storytelling. All the contents were shared via Bluetooth and a projector. A collective Facebook profile was created as a space for products’ publication (Figure 1).

The aim of connecting individual devices to a broader social network was to explore their potentialities for communication and development in participation. Publication was initially made through a computer, then directly through mobile devices and Facebook mobile. Participants used their personal phones for multimedia production, while the devices to update Facebook mobile were provided by the educators, who covered the cost of sending the texts.

Stories were written collectively using a shared mobile phone. Each participant wrote a text message with a piece of a story, sent it for publication on the Facebook profile and passed the device to the next peer. The Facebook page was constantly refreshed, in order to follow the story in real time. Relay writing was chosen to break down resistance to participation and to promote attention, respect and narrative coherence. At the end, the group selected one story to be dramatised and video recorded with mobile devices, simulating the work of a real movie troupe.
**Purposes and aims**

The overall purpose of the research project was to promote social change, and to provide teens with resources for personal and social development. More specifically, the research project intended to face the following issues:

- How to help teenagers exploit their being familiar with mobile phones and SNS to become more active and aware users of digital media.
- How to develop participants’ new media literacies, particularly referring to multimedia production and connectivity.
- How to improve participants’ capacity for self-expression and their narrative skills.
- How to improve participants’ self-representations and their representation of the community.

**Methods**

We followed an action-research approach based on three cycles of action, involving educators and researchers in the process of reflection and (re)planning. In the different cycles, we adopted diverse qualitative research methods to collect and analyse data, paying attention especially to the conceptual categories of self-representation, self-expression, interaction, narrative and new media literacies. In particular, to start investigating participants’ self-representations and evaluate the relevance of the experience for self-esteem and self-expression, we used projective diagnostic techniques (Burns 1987), asking participants to first draw their family and then a tree in a garden. An experienced psychologist was involved in the analysis. As suggested in the literature, we considered space, shape and layout for interpreting drawings. As is well known, the use of these techniques requires caution, as they have a number of limitations (Lilienfeld, Wood, and Garb 2000). Therefore, we adopted them in a combination with other research tools and compared the results with data gathered by using other techniques.

During the process, a series of formal and informal meetings, direct and indirect observations, and interactions took place both with teenagers and educators. Observations and interactions occurred mostly during the meetings. In particular, the educator who acted as ‘acteur-chercheur’ kept a diary with comments on the ongoing activities, notes on participants’ levels of satisfaction and remarks on the interactions. The diary was shared with the media educator to monitor the project on a step-by-step basis, and to evaluate and re-plan activities to increase pupils’ participation and provide them with some personal gratification.

At the same time, all the sessions were being video recorded, thus producing a large amount of visual data (230 min). They were analysed separately by the two researchers, who coded them on the basis of three main categories: self-representation, interaction and role of media. After the analysis, researchers compared their observational notes and negotiated a common understanding of the
data, thus producing a narrative synthesis. In the end, various types of data – including diaries from observations, documents, video recordings, photos and multimedia products – were collected and then organised into temporary categories with labels. Through iterative analyses, the categories and labels evolved in ways that would facilitate the more efficient organisation of the overall data and a narrative synthesis was produced. To ensure trustworthiness and credibility (Lincoln and Guba 1985), data were triangulated from different sources and the final report was submitted to educators for the members to check.

Table 1 summarises the overall research process, including procedures, methods and categories of analysis.

Findings

Observation and monitoring

The analysis of diary’s notes and observations helped us to focus our attention on the evolving dynamics of the process over time. Thus, observations are divided into three categories: ‘permanence’, which refers to elements that remained stable; ‘resistance’, which includes attitudes or behaviour related to refusing and ‘evolution’, which pertains to aspects that changed during the process.

Permanence

- Attendance and space. Although attendance at the R.eTe. programme was compulsory, it was highly discontinuous, partly because of the lack of support from pupils’ families. Moreover, meetings were held in two multi-purpose headquarters of Piagge’s community where, as the educator noted, ‘participants can stay and leave, whilst other children, who are curious on what is going on, can enter into the room’.

- Relationship with educators. The relationship of trust between children and educators was an important resource, especially for the acceptance of the media educator. Educators played a fundamental role and followed the children closely during the activities ‘each group of children was joined by an educator, who helped overcoming difficulties […] their presence was very functional’.

Resistance

- School refusal. When the activities were too similar to formal learning, participants perceived them as being scholastic and showed oppositional attitudes towards school. As the educator observed, ‘some difficulties emerged during the initial test […] there was the risk of the project
Table 1. The action-research process.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stages</th>
<th>Problem</th>
<th>Strategies</th>
<th>Application</th>
<th>Evaluation</th>
<th>Reflection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Approaching mobile functions</td>
<td>How do teens perceive themselves and their media?</td>
<td>Brainstorming on media representations and discovering mobile functionalities</td>
<td>Creating the mobile function map</td>
<td>Projective tests</td>
<td>Low level of knowledge and skills about specific functions of mobile phones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and narratives</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Low level of self-esteem</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>How to stimulate self-expression</td>
<td>How to stimulate self-expression and teens' attitude towards narrative</td>
<td>Expliciting multimedia practices</td>
<td>Taking, commenting and naming pictures</td>
<td>Direct and indirect observation Video recordings</td>
<td>Emerging difficulties in narrative and self-expression Participation divisions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and teens' attitude towards narrative</td>
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<tr>
<td>Being on the Net to share micro-</td>
<td>How to socialise stories on the net</td>
<td>Using social media</td>
<td>Creation of Facebook profile</td>
<td>Direct and indirect observation Video recordings</td>
<td>Participation divide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>stories created by SMSs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Enthusiasm and familiarity with social network</td>
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<th>Stages</th>
<th>Problem</th>
<th>Strategies</th>
<th>Application</th>
<th>Evaluation</th>
<th>Reflection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How to prompt teens to create stories through collaboration</td>
<td>Group work</td>
<td>Creation of mobile stories through SMSs and written stories</td>
<td>Direct and indirect observation</td>
<td>Positive impact of the use of mobile phones on narrative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inventing and representing stories</td>
<td>How to improve teens involvement in creating stories</td>
<td>Video production and team work</td>
<td>Social reading of the stories, comments and selection Video recording</td>
<td>Direct and indirect observation</td>
<td>High level of involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How to empower teens’ self-expression and self-representation</td>
<td>Public event</td>
<td>Journalistic report based on the use of cell phone in a public event taking place in the Piagge community</td>
<td>Direct and indirect observation</td>
<td>Improvement of self-esteem and community representation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Underlying criteria</td>
<td>Self-representation, self-expression, interaction, narrative and new media literacy</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
being perceived as schooling and boring’. Another significant episode occurred during the creation of the Facebook profile, when the proposal of naming it ‘No school’ roused enthusiastic reactions from all.

- **Difference of age.** When the action-research project took place, the R.ETe. programme was in a transitory phase with ‘old members and new entries undermining the stability of the group’. Divisions amongst participants were often based on differences of age (‘younger children interacted mostly between themselves, as did the older ones’).

**Evolution**

- **Participation.** Sometimes older members boycotted the activities in order to reaffirm their leadership ‘older members tended to annoy younger participants when they were not at the centre of attention’, with important consequences for the overall participation levels: ‘Older members were not inclusive towards younger ones, and sometimes leaders were so dominant that there was no possibility for others to act’.

- However, during the project an improvement was observed: ‘from the second stage onwards, they were more collaborative… even those who persisted in maintaining an attitude of refusal became active over the time’.

- **Self-image.** Some participants refused to be photographed, whilst others posed in front of the cameras. Also, publication on Facebook was perceived in different ways: ‘Facebook is the mirror of their identity, their space for peer interaction. That’s why sometimes we perceived a bit of anxiety when photos or videos were posted on the profile, as if it could be a threat to their reputation’. As the activities continued, all the participants became more comfortable with their self-images. The educator was surprised that during the video shooting ‘children have been very uninhibited in front of the camera’, and asked to immediately publish their recordings. The initial refusal disappeared progressively, thus giving way to creativity.

- **Narrative.** Before the project, storytelling had never been realised in the R.eTe. programme; therefore, a gradual path towards narrative was planned. Participants appeared immediately to be in trouble: ‘The idea was to begin creating the story orally by running a digital recorder within the group, but two rounds were made and not even a word was spoken’. This resistance was partially overcome by the use of mobile technologies: ‘we were very impressed that nobody wanted to record his voice, but with mobile phones they immediately got involved’. Thereafter, handwriting was preferred, so that participants could concentrate and learn some fundamental rules on narrative and collaborative writing. Results were not long in coming as ‘stories came to an end, and in terms of content there were a lot of teenagers’.
Finally, a meeting was organised to evaluate the experience with the educators and, after 10 months, all the research results were submitted to them for a member check. The educators essentially agreed with the researchers’ analysis. However, they put more emphasis on the impact of the environment and the use of the media. They insisted on the influence of the family background, which ends up limiting children’s chance for social redemption:

They live in a context that produces passivity, which is a mindset, even in the discourses they hear at home [...]. With such problematic families the result is that they remain tied into this dynamic and it’s really hard to break it.

As regards the potential of using digital technologies to engage young people, educators expected an immediate relapse, but it was observed that the involvement had grown progressively. In particular, encouraging children to reflect on familiar means of communication proved to be challenging, as well as proposing creative or complex practices ‘Children have their ways of using them […]. Where there is a need for commitment, a little more dedication, as in studying, then they say no’. In any case, educators believe that technologies have served to attract attention and increase participation, so they could also be used to open children’s horizons and to make them reflect critically on unquestioned aspects of life.

**Visual data**

*Getting the power over the media*

During the early stage of the activity, the use of the video camera was questioned by participants who asked for clarification about the purposes (‘Why do you video record us?’) and the audience (‘Who will be seeing this video?’) of video recordings. In raising similar questions, the young participants showed a certain shrewdness, and during the activity they came progressively into possession of the video camera. Indeed, if at the beginning the video recordings were taken by using fixed camera, the pupils later grabbed the video camera and started steering the shootings.

The visual data collected are therefore heterogeneous in nature. The direct action of the pupils with the camera has changed their role, making them not only the object of the visual representation. They became in some measure active participants in the research, thus introducing a previously absent point of view. When teenagers take control over the media, foreground shots abound, as well as zooms into specific parts of the body, accompanied by comments, along with exploratory observations and looking around.

*From ‘pariahs’ to peers*

The analysis of visual data confirms the existence of a dialectic between young and older participants, with young members often considered as ‘pariahs’
within the group. To give an example, when it came to finding a name for the collective profile, older participants attempted to appropriate it through the imposition of their names (‘Yes, we agree with the creation of the Facebook profile, but you must call it A. or S.’). Similar situations recurred frequently, even with respect to the use of the other tools. An exemplary case was the monopolisation of the computer by S. during the creation of the Facebook profile. The dialectics between young and older participants gradually disappeared, partially thanks to the teenagers’ continuous micro-negotiations on the use of the media. They were able to establish a routine that allowed everyone to have access to the available media.

Media as ambivalent resources

All the media used in the project played ambivalent functions which swung between the opposite poles of isolation and aggregation, on the one side, and attraction/distraction on the other. For example B., a boy with special needs, remained totally out of the activity, taking pictures in isolation around the room. However, B. took also pictures of others, thus attracting their attention. His peers asked him to see his shots, commented on them and also censored some pictures. We can say that B. had broken his isolation thanks to the images, which became a bridge to the outside, a chance to socialise.

Another case is exemplified by A1. and A2., two young girls who were extremely attracted by the video camera. In this case, the media seemed to disturb the group work, but that is not all. The tremendous curiosity which animated A1. and A2. took the form of a game, a sort of ‘image hunting’. The relationship of the youngest members of the group with visual representation was mainly characterised by this playful dimension. However, this curiosity also took the form of a process of discovery: What do you see from behind the video camera? What do you see on the screen, if I record A. or T.? What will I look like on the screen?

Even the rest of the group did not remain immune from media appeal. The teenagers shot each other posing in front of the camera, they looked at each other and smiled, they liked or disliked themselves on the screen. Once again, it was a game of the discovery of the self and others.

Product analysis

A total of six stories were created, including three stories written through SMSs and three hand-written. In both cases, there were plenty of abbreviations, vernacular words and grammar mistakes, as well as typical expressions of short text messaging and some stylistic features of the fable genre ‘C’era una volta... = Once upon a time...’.

The stories were characterised by brevity, accompanied by an extreme simplicity of plot and merely sketched characters. In most cases, the protagonists were children or adolescents, but had neither names nor specific qualities,
with the exception of aesthetic and gender attributes (e.g., ‘Three beautiful girls with amazing long hair’).

The topics are related to the condition of adolescence: some stories are linked to pupils’ direct experience, whilst others referred to imaginary constructions.

The first group of stories included examples of real adolescents’ life, also representing gender relationships. The story is just like an instantaneous picture of an everyday interaction involving young boys and girls, distinguished by opposite aesthetic attributes: females are beautiful, whilst males are dirty. In the background, just timidly mentioned, there is also a reference to the status of their relationships (Table 2).

In this first group, there is also the theme of a generational clash: characters are identified and opposed for belonging to different stages of life; childhood and old age. This topic intrigued the participants, who discussed and changed the conclusion for the story to a happy ending (Table 3). This story probably permitted the teenagers a form of identification, and this is why it was selected to be put on stage and videorecorded.

As a bridging theme between real life and imaginary, the smoking issue appears in a story where buying cigarettes ends in an episode of theft and violence, which requires the intervention of the police (Table 4). Indeed, some participants had already started to smoke, but the development of the story is based on stereotypes about the young people of the suburbs and illegality.

Finally, there is a reference to the media mainstream such as TV channels aimed at young people. The story is representative of the induced imagination of youth: characters and themes are related to the entertainment world, and reveal teenagers’ desire to travel around the world and their aspirations to become famous and rich.

Table 2. Transcript no. 1 – sms story.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Italian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Let’s try to make a story…</td>
<td>Proviamo a fare una storia…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once upon a time there were some guys</td>
<td>Cerano una volta dei ragazzi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three pretty girls with beautiful long hair and two crazy boys, really nice 😊</td>
<td>Tre belle ragazze con fantastici capelli lunghi e due ragazzi pazzerelli, ma molto simpatici :)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One girl had blonde hair and two had brown hair. They all were in a relationship. They were going to the sea by car</td>
<td>Una ragazza bionda e due more. Erano fidanzate tutte e tre. Andavano al mare con la macchina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The two boys were dirty</td>
<td>I 2 ragazzi erano sporchi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maybe were they hitchhiking to go to the sea and wash themselves? I have nothing to say</td>
<td>Che facevano l’aUTOStop per andare al mare a darsi una pulita? Non ho niente per te.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>While not having anything for them, they arrived to the sea and bathed….naked!</td>
<td>Pur non avendo niente x loro, arrivarono al mare e fecero il bagno… Nudi!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure drawings

A total of 16 drawings were collected, 9 inbound and 7 outbound. We report below the findings related to the comparison between pre and post test, which was possible only in six cases.
Description of the drawings made at the beginning

**Space.** In most cases the space is a sort of vacuum, as the zero gravity figures fluctuate without a supporting base. Half of the teenagers used only a portion of the sheet, generally the central area of the frame.

**Shape.** The representation of human figures is always stylised, two-dimensional and without details, apart from the length of the hair that marks gender diversity. Drawings are childish, resemble cartoons or puppets, and give a strong impression of unreality. In a few cases, hands or feet are not represented and eyes are closed or without pupils, as if the figure could not see.

**Layout.** The characters of the family stand on split-levels. The disposition is used to suggest the type of relationship occurring between the figures: the vertical axis indicates the hierarchy and who is higher is more important; the horizontal axis denotes the relationship in affective terms, such as when the children represent himself close to one parent. None of the children collocate himself at the centre of the layout and sometimes they stand at the periphery, almost like a satellite.

Description of the drawings made at the end

**Space.** There is a greater use of space: in three cases, the frame was completely filled in, even including the border. The ground and the horizon are traced, thus providing a basis for figures.

**Shape.** The tree figures are realistic and detailed with foliage, branches and roots. In some cases, other natural elements and a small human figure are present in the garden.

**Layout.** In most drawings, the tree stands at the centre and the human figure, when present, stands on the same level as the plant.

While keeping in mind the limitations of projective tools, we can compare drawings before and after the intervention to detect any changes, as summarised in Table 5 and exemplified in Figure 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 5. Comparative synthesis.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Drawings at the beginning</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Space</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Shape</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Layout</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Discussion

This action-research brought about three main results regarding the potential of mobile storytelling for self-expression and the participation of young people at risk. Since the beginning, participants showed great difficulties in representing themselves directly. Both drawings and stories are strongly characterised by simplicity, with disembodied figures and no context. Such results are consistent with their (pre)adolescent condition, when the subject is engaged in the creation of identity (Erikson 1968). But in our case, the phenomenon was very accentuated entailing a sort of non-visibility strategy. However, the use of multimedia as an informal resource seems to have helped them explore themselves. Indeed, visual data reveal that participants have spontaneously exploited the camera to shoot each other, to investigate their bodies, to reflect and be reflected. This type of use can be partly explained as a consequence of digital media’s affordances: the screen display prompts the children to check the results, enabling comments and ratings from the others. This seems to confirm the conclusion of Pachler, Bachmair, and Cook (2010) that young people are developing new habits of learning wherein everyday life becomes a potential educational resource in relation to personal definitions of relevance.

Another result reflects the positive role that media played in stimulating teens’ participation. As emerged from direct and indirect observations, when asked to talk orally about themselves, pupils did not react, leaving room only for the heavy sound of silence. But when prompted by mobile phones, they started taking and sharing pictures, writing sentences and discovering the cell phone’s multimedia functionalities. Moreover, when teens were involved in
video recording, they showed collaborative attitudes and engagement. As underlined by Vasudevan (2006), such creative practices can be particularly useful, precisely for those social groups that are only represented by others or who are marginalised by the dominant public culture. The increased use of space, in the final drawings, could be understood as a result of creative media processes.

Further considerations pertain to the domain of literacy and new media literacy. One of the results was that stories were very short and full of mistakes. In some way, this might be obvious, but the shortness of the texts cannot be explained only by referring to the particular features of mobile tools. Indeed, children might have been producing more SMSs than they did. As in other studies on literacy and mobile texting (Durkin, Conti-Ramsden, and Walker 2011), laconicism and misspelling testified to children’s linguistic difficulties. So, even though adolescents have been early adopter of mobile technologies (Caron and Caronia 2007), individuals may not have had equal linguistic and media skills. From this perspective, the use of digital media can reinforce pre-existing divides (Hargittai and Walejko 2008) and this suggests that there is a strong requirement for public education to take a much more active role (both in formal and informal contexts) in balancing inequalities with the development of technical, social and linguistic skills.

Conclusion

Mobile storytelling seems to offer a favourable context for self-expression of marginalised groups. Digital media and online spaces seem to provide a fertile context for participatory culture and new engagement, whereby youth self-expression can be turned from the private to the public voice (Rheingold 2008). As we noticed in our project, writing stories through mobile phones has opened the way to creativity and collaboration, turning silence into play and discovery. This does not mean that a ‘technological miracle’ occurred in the experience, but that encouraging certain uses of the media could have positive effects on the exploration and expression of identities.

The study had, naturally, a number of limitations as it involved a few group of teens for a relatively short time. For these reasons, the findings cannot be generalised or transferred to other contexts. Moreover, we did not evaluate the indirect impact that the intervention had on pupils’ educational performance at school. Nor did we analyse the social benefits of the experience for the children and their families. However, some unplanned events demonstrated that the project has changed the relationship between the children and the community. After the intervention, teenagers started to participate publicly in the community’s meetings and for the first time they exchanged their views with adults. Subsequently, they also asked the community to fund the project for another year. In a word, they took a role in the public space of governance, rebuilding a link which promised to improve their relationship with their surrounding environment.
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Notes on contributors
Maria Ranieri is an Aggregate Professor of Educational Methods and Technology at the Faculty of Education, University of Florence. Her main research areas include theory and methodology relating to media and technology in education, as well as work around teachers’ practice and students’ learning.

Isabella Bruni is a PhD student in Communication Studies at the University La Sapienzenza of Rome and a media educator. Her research interests relate to mobile learning and digital storytelling through social media.

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