Children testing tablets and apps

Morten Søby

The age at which children are online in a self-directed manner has dropped dramatically as a result of touchscreens and tablet computers based on touch and swipe technology. However, little is presently known about the benefits and opportunities, or the risks and challenges, of young children’s internet use.

Digital media is already a part of children’s everyday life from an early stage. The report The Digital Universe of Young Children (Guðmundsdóttir and Hardersen 2012) shows that there is a great variety of access and use of digital devices among young children, and that many parents are positive about their children’s use of them, as they see the potential for learning and development.

In Norway, many preschool teachers use tablets in their teaching, and many children have their own tablets at home. Their intuitive touch screen interface and portability makes them appealing and easy to use. The market of educational apps aimed at young children is developing. Through the combination of apps and innovative teaching strategies, children are able to try out new ways of doing things: making connections between elements; creating new stories; solving problems together; rehearsing and modifying their work and seeing things from different perspectives.

This issue of Nordic Journal of Digital Literacy (NJDL) covers three studies of children as technology users, and the play and learning potential of technology.

With the advent of digital technologies, new contexts are created for multimodal ways of narrating. Åberg, Lantz-Andersson & Pramling’s paper takes up a theme that is evident in its title, Children’s digital storymaking, and is based on a study of eight six-year-olds in a primary school. The school is located near the countryside in a middle-class area. It was selected due to its participation in a larger municipal project on learning to read and write using digital technology. To summarise the findings the authors claim that: “In all three storymaking activities, the children demonstrated an ability to structure a coherent narrative, although an intelligible content was only evident in one of the final stories. The teacher’s role, arguably, becomes crucial for the final result, regardless of the resources inherent in the software, which is in line with earlier studies on technology-mediated activities.”

The paper by Hvit, called: Are we spinning or is it the board? explores young children’s interaction with an interactive whiteboard in preschool. Analyses of video recordings show how the children, through embodied and multi-direct-
tional interactions, interpret, explore and construct signs on the interactive whiteboard (IWB). By relating children’s careful explorations to meaning making and sign making, interactions with the IWB can be looked upon as part of children’s initial literate explorations in multimodal text productions.

In the article, «That’s how much I can do!» Children’s agency in digital tablet activities in a Swedish preschool environment, Petersen explores children’s agency in respect to the relations constituted between the participants’ interaction and the design affordances of digital tablets. The data is drawn from video ethnographic research of children between the ages of one and a half and five years in three Swedish preschool groups. The findings of Petersen underscore the importance of taking into account how the participants’ interaction interplays with the affordances of the touch screen, the portability and the use of pictorial modes within the applications. This in turn contributed to the children’s agency in the digital tablet activities.

The content of this issue of NJDL will therefore contribute to a better understanding of young children’s use of technology at an early age and provide useful evidence for researchers, professionals and policy makers. According to the Swedish researcher Susanne Kjällander (2014), «children do not learn linearly exactly what is meant to be learned – therefore open apps that allow transdisciplinary and rhizomatic learning paths are a lot more attractive to children. Children play by transforming and challenging the applications on the digital tablet and the teacher’s didactic design – at all times testing boundaries to see what the app makes possible.»

This agrees with the three studies in the present issue: that children’s learning involves social processes in which they consciously try out their understanding in interaction with each other.

REFERENCES