WG5 Workshop

Ethical Issues related to Young Children and Digital Media: Collaborative Workshop for researchers and practitioners

Date: Day 1: 30 November (10:00h - 17:00h); Day 2: 1 December 2017 (10:00h- 16:00h)
Venue: "La Corrala" Cultural Centre, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid (UAM), Madrid, Spain.

Executive Summary

This report summarizes the activities and conclusions developed during a 2-day think tank / workshop around ethical issues in relation to digital media, research and work with young children. The event included researchers from the DigiLitEY COST Action and local stakeholders from Spain. Day 1 of the workshop focused on researcher perspectives and identified key ethical issues in relation to: informed consent, confidentiality, boundaries, data storage, reciprocity and dialogic processes in research. Participants also addressed how ethical issues are framed in the introduction of digital technology in early childhood settings, by industry and in policy – including cross-national differences. Day 2 piloted a workshop format to explore ethical issues with practitioners and local stakeholders that addressed ethical concerns, how these are conceptualized and how ethical issues can be communicated.

Keywords: Ethics; Collaborative Work; Co-Production of Knowledge; Professional Workshop; Early Childhood; Technology; Digital Practices

Introduction

As part of the DigiLitEY Cost Action, Working Group 5 Coordinators David Poveda and Rosie Flewitt held a 2-day collaborative workshop in late Autumn 2017 to explore different stakeholders' perspectives on ethical issues related to young children and digital media. The 2-day event was held in Madrid and was co-organised by Cristina Aliagas, Marta Morgade and Mitsuko Matsumoto. This exploratory workshop brought together academic researchers from across Europe and diverse Spain-resident professionals working in education, child care, children's rights and journalism about childhood. The aims of the event were:

- To debate key ethical issues encountered by academic researchers working in the field of young children's digital literacy practices (Day 1)
- To explore and problematize key ethical issues and frameworks for non-academic professionals working with young children and digital media (Day 2)
- To collate the views expressed by the diverse stakeholders and create an interdisciplinary, multi-professional dialogue around ethics and working with young children and digital media (Days 1 and 2)

- To develop and test a possible format for a workshop-training event designed to engage non-academic practitioners with ethical issues surrounding young children's experiences with digital media (Day 2)

The workshops were set up as collaborative discussion spaces between researchers, facilitators and practitioners to explore a topic that is of growing concern in an age where young children engage regularly with a range of digital devices in diverse digital platforms, and where academic and non-academic professionals use a range of digital technologies to observe and document children's learning, and to share the resultant information about children on digital platforms. The Workshop-Training event on Day 2 was conceived with a flexible and adaptable work-plan that could be implemented or adapted across a variety of professional and training scenarios. In this report, we present an outline of activities on each day, a summary of outcomes from Day 1, and we reflect critically on the implementation of the workshop-training event held on Day 2. We conclude by proposing some ideas for future iterations of the workshop-training event, informed by our own critical assessment and by participant feedback.

Academics from DigiLitEY COST Action	*Local Stakeholders*
Alison Clark (UK) Anca Velicu (Romania) Saara Saloma (Finland) Cristina Aliagas (Spain) Rosie Flewitt (UK) Julia Gillen (UK) David Poveda (Spain, local organizer) Mitsuko Matsumoto (Spain, local organizer) Marta Morgade (Spain, local organizer)	David León (Fundacion CNSE) Eulalia Jarque (AMEIGI) Blanza Azanza (AMEIGI) Manuel Palomares (Educasapiens - Ciudad Real) María Zabala (Digital Parenting Consultant) Nahia Azpiroz (Fundacion Sanders) Robert Sanders (Fundacion Sanders

Background

Most research exploring children's online and offline use of digital technology has until recently mainly focussed on 9-16 years olds (for example, Lobe *et al* 2011; Livingstone *et al* 2011). However, a growing body of research has identified that ever younger children are accessing a wide range of digital devices (smartphones, tablets, laptops, smart TVs) even from the first months in life (Marsh *et al* 2015; Kumpulainen and Gillen 2017; Gillen *et al* 2018). Research also highlights the importance of the home environment and other community learning spaces (e.g. libraries, museums) in supporting young children's learning about, with and through digital technology (Plowman, McPake and Stephen 2008; Galera, Matsumoto and Poveda 2016; Kumpulainen and Gillen 2017). This is a relatively small but burgeoning field of enquiry, where very few resources have been developed to respond to the growing demand from early years researchers, professionals and practitioners for guidance regarding how to approach the

study of young children's engagement with digital technologies (Marsh *et al* 2017). This includes a lack of appropriate guidance around ethics, which is an aspect of academic, professional and parental practice that has fuelled public and policy debates about the place of digital technologies and media in children's lives (Staksrud 2015, Livingstone and Third 2017; Flewitt (2019, in press).

In this context, we sought to engage researchers and practitioners in the early years from a wide variety of settings to discuss and reflect critically on ethical questions and issues they had encountered in their work. We saw this collaboration between researchers and practitioners as an important opportunity to 'interthink' (Littleton and Mercer 2013), to find creative and ethical solutions to some of the challenges identified, and to work collaboratively to map out the beginnings of a possible ethical framework with shared core values for research and professional practice in this field. Our work with practitioners was informed by evidence that practitioner-researcher collaboration can be an effective way to shape developments in an emergent field and to agree on a working agenda (Lunt, Shaw and Fouché 2010), both by incorporating different perspectives and by bridging any potential divides between researcher and childhood professionals' perspectives. To facilitate the discussions, we approached ethics about early childhood and digital technology as: a) situated practice that unfolds in local contexts under shared "standards of reasonableness" (Kopelman 1997); and b) as an ongoing process that is open to reflection, negotiation and renegotiation when working with young children and their families (Flewitt 2005; Moriña 2017). In short, we viewed generalised guidance or "recipes" as inadequate and we recognised the need for tools for thinking that can nourish critical reflection amongst and between practitioners and researchers who face particular ethical challenge in particular contexts (Graham *et al* 2013).

Workshop collaboration with researchers

Figure 1: Madrid Ethics Workshop Activities

Prior to the Madrid workshops, we had mapped out key themes from extant literature in the emerging field of ethics in research with and about young children in digital environments, and had held a preliminary consultation workshop with approx. 50 participants (mostly academic but also from the digital gaming industry) at the DigiLitEY conference, Bologna, in August 2017. We structured Day 1 of our consultation workshop with academic researchers around a 'honeycomb' of potential themes for discussion, where we purposefully left several hexagons empty to stimulate open debate and reflection about ethics issues that may not yet have been considered, as shown in Figure 2.
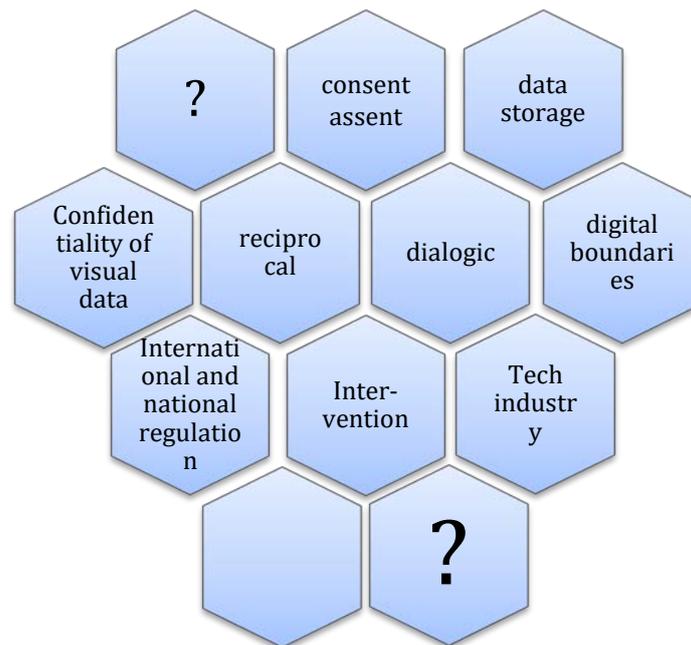

Figure 2: Honeycomb of emerging ethics themes

Throughout Day 1, we ran a series of small and whole group activities to stimulate personal and group reflection on ethics issues, to contemplate and debate 'problem' scenarios and attempt to identify potential ethics issues and concerns. Through extensive debate and collaboration, by the end of Day 1, we had agreed that the following dimensions could serve as a starting point to build a robust framework for ethics when conducting research with and about young children's digital literacy practices:

1. Voluntary Informed Consent/ Assent

This included discussion of issues around the notion of 'informed' consent when a child is very young and future outputs from research are not yet clear, and the need to 'manage expectations'. The difference between assent and consent were debated, along with the need to recognise that children's assent is not legally valid in most nation states – parents/ guardians act as gatekeepers and bear responsibility for consent to take part in research. Consent was viewed as 'ongoing' and provisional, highlighting the need to monitor and assess children's and adults' willingness to participate throughout the research process (with researchers and others monitoring child(ren)'s behaviours for any signs of discomfort or distress at being involved in research). There was agreement that consideration should also be given to privacy issues and conflicts between parents and children and to the ethics of using incentives to motivate children and adults' participation. There is also a repsonsibility to consider potential long-term effects of participating in research (e.g. psychological effects/impacts).

2. Confidentiality and visual data

Great debate ensued regarding the balance of ethical and practical considerations and consent for the use of still and moving images of child and adult participants and how any such images are used, including the need to allay any concerns and to seek out exemplary practice from other disciplinary ethics approaches e.g. medical research ethics.

3. Boundaries of digital research

It was recognised that the boundaries for digital research are often unclear and virtual, and this presents novel ethical challenges, where there is a risk of technology effectively sidelining researcher judgements during data collection.

4. Research as dialogic rather than researcher-participant dichotomy

There was widespread agreement that where possible, a dialogic approach to research endeavour should be adopted. That is, through open and repeated interaction with participants, particularly during interviews but also during early conversations with participants. The aim should not be to minimise the presence of the researcher and associated influences, but rather to acknowledge that research is a social and dialogic process. This in turn has implications for research validity, and requires reflection on the effects of reactivity through dialogue (reactivity as the presence of the researcher influencing the participants' behaviours e.g. children wanting to please the researcher; parents conforming to social expectations).

5. Beneficence/Reciprocity in research processes

Parents and education professionals often request guidance on how to mediate children's technology use, so although it may be counter-intuitive for some, researchers might produce guidelines and examples of practice regarding young children's technology use, and this is also needed for the tech industry. Rather than producing general 'guidelines', educative programmes and reflective training was the preferred route for such feedback to participants.

Participatory research with children, and developing innovative research approaches to ensure children's perspectives are represented was also considered important in this regard.

6. Ethics of intervening/ introducing technology into children's lives

Exposing children to technology when they have not previously used technology (an issue that may overlap with informed consent) had been found by some workshop members to create tensions within families, for example where one father had raised concerns about a researcher showing an iPad to his child and in so doing, created expectations about having a tablet at home. Conversely, there is a need to ensure that legal guardians do not feel pressured to engage in research about and with digital technology because they do not want their child to 'fall behind'. Researchers should be mindful that the research process may be harmful in unanticipated ways – ways to which researchers are 'blinded' by the benefits of technology use. Concerns were also raised about how researchers can inform debates about (often higher-income parents) removing technology from children's lives for fear of harm. Do we as researchers have a right to unsettle parental choices? Is this ethical? Do we have an ethical responsibility to enable children's technology use as a human right of 21st Century children? These issues had caused considerable anguish amongst the researcher community that we consulted.

7. Diversity in national and international ethics codes and principles

The international characteristics of extant research literature, as well as feedback from participants at the September 2017 Bologna WG5 DigiLitEY conference workshop and the December 2017 Madrid workshops highlighted the distinct differences in nation states' guidance about young children and digital media, even within world regions that share some legislative features, such as across Europe. The need to inform international guidance was unanimously agreed upon, whilst it was also recognised that EU ethics guidelines are interpreted in national contexts, where guidance must align with local legal requirements and cultures of childhood. It was recognised that some nations have begun to change legislation in response to the new challenges of digital cultures and platforms, and that there is wide variation in these responses across nations (see Flewitt, 2019, forthcoming). Researchers need to be conscious of North-South implications where some parents and children believe that technology is essential, and will endure real hardship to try and ensure their child has access to a computer. Rather than being limited by national laws and guidance, the proposal was made for a 'Regulatory Sandbox' as a resource, where all players can contribute perspectives (parents, teachers, tech industry, researchers etc), but that this would require commitment of funds and personnel to manage its efficacy.

8. Ethics and policy

This was seen as a related yet distinct area of work, to address policies and legal frameworks that inhibit innovation through prohibitive law and incentives. A need was perceived to ensure there is alignment between research findings and policy, with multidisciplinary meetings to

draft policy, with lawyers, data protection specialists, developers, parents, teachers, children's rights advocates, academics etc.

9. Ethics and tech industry

Suggestions were made to open up links and dialogue with tech companies to ensure research has a positive impact on children's uses of technology, the resources they have access to and the support they receive in using them. Recommendations were made to work with tech industry to resolve tensions between market-driven and research-driven/informed technology and support, and to ensure developers in tech industry consider children's rights and protection.

10. Data storage, security and governance of funded research

Last but not least, considerable debate was sparked by the need to ensure security in data storage. This was an area where secure solutions were considered to be highly technical and where many researchers are dependent on technical advice from their institutions, but are responsible for ensuring that they receive training and advice to minimise any security breaches of personal data.

Workshop-training with childhood professionals and researchers

Figure 3: Madrid Stakeholders Workshop

The objectives for Day 2 and the workshop-training were twofold:
  (1) Create a space where concerns, experiences and practices around ethical issues and dilemmas in the area of young children and digital technology can be explored and compiled;
  (2) Test the viability of a flexible working format susceptible to adaptation and reuse in a variety of professional settings (e.g. pre-service training events, in-service training

sessions in schools and organizations, collaborative research events, etc.) and cultural contexts.

In order to analyse the workshop debates, we video and audio-recorded the session with the consent of participants and we also took photos of the texts being produced. Here, we present a brief overview of the session format, which could be adapted to run a half-day or full-day training session (see Matsumoto et al 2019 for more a detailed discussion). The first part of the workshop adopted a broad approach focused on bringing out and discussing issues related to the digital activities of young children. The second part focused more specifically on ethics, including research ethics, and set these aspects into dialogue with professional practices.

Figure 4 summarizes the organization of the first part of the session, which had three sub-themes: 1) sharing concrete experiences; 2) moving to critical reflection and analysis; and 3) collaboratively build new perspectives.

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Activity 1: Introduction and warm-up
(This first set of activities helps participants gain a shared sense of what we are going to discuss and achieve through the workshop).

Introduction
Summarize with key descriptors about digital technology and early childhood
Identify challenges / concerns

Activity 2: Advantages and disadvantages: Literacy and creativity
(This part explores perceived advantages and disadvantages for particular areas of children's learning and development. In our case, literacy and creativity, since these are essential pieces of digital practices).

Discuss and define Literacy / Digital literacies in early childhood
Discuss and define Creativity / Digital creativity in early childhood

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Activity 3: Childhood, technology, digital media and socio-educational challenges
(This part focuses on critical cross-cutting themes that may be particularly relevant to the experiences and professional practices of participants. In our case two critical themes relevant to the work of a heterogenous group of practitioners).

Discuss issues of accessibility, inclusion and equity
Discuss themes regarding collaboration, participation and interaction

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Figure 4: Overview of the first part of the workshop-training event on digital technologies and young children

The second part of the session focused specifically on ethics and was structured in three sections. We began ***Activity 3*** with discussion of ethical guidelines as formulated in research settings and realised in research practices. Professional participants were encouraged to engage with these materials and interpret them in the contexts of their own work environments and practices – noting any shortcomings in the guidelines, and potential points of conflict. This session ended with participants discussing what resources, such as ethical guidelines in written form, a public clearing-house/agency, etc. might be valuable in their work setting.

Activity 4: Principles for thinking about ethics: From research to practice
In this activity, participants were shown ethics principles ranging from international and universally agreed principles in research with human beings to emerging ethical concerns in digitally mediated scenarios. For this activity, participants worked in small groups to discuss how the four principles of avoiding harm, protecting from risk, ensuring consent/assent and ensuring anonymity/authorship were handled in their own work contexts, more specifically, in relation to digital practices and digitally mediated work with children. Facilitators were on hand to explain briefly how these four principles are understood in research contexts. This gave rise to rich discussion of complementary or alternative ethical principles relevant to their own settings, including, for example, the binding nature of existing legal frameworks as more powerful than ethical principles or research codes. Further concerns emerged around the reliability of information that families, children and practitioners have access to, and how this information influences decision-making, with a well-grounded fear that commercial interests and digital algorithms drive the information they receive, which may have profound impacts on how decisions are made regarding education and child-rearing.

Activity 5: Ethical challenges: From practice to context
Here, participants returned to the challenges and concerns they identified and noted during Activity 1, and working independently were invited to review their earlier statements about ethical principles, and to note any changes in their thinking, and to discard any which they no longer felt were relevant. They were then asked to place their remaining post-it notes in the matrix shown in Figure 5, and to decide how their incidents were situated along the two axes of (a) situations that range from more public to more private spaces; (b) and how sensitive or not they may be for the children in their care. Both issues are key aspects in social debates about "risk" and children in the digital age
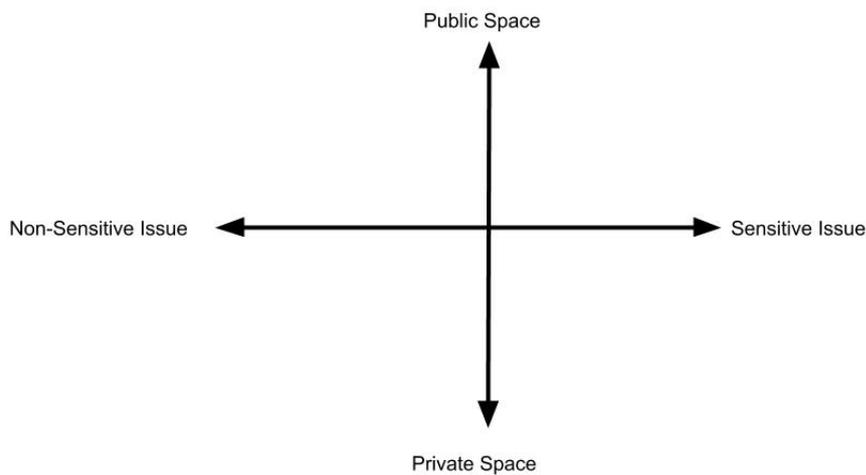
Figure 5: A spatial matrix to situate ethical incidents / challenges

Once all participants had placed their examples in the matrix, they worked in small groups to discuss the patterns or clusters that emerged through this activity.

Activity 6: Instruments to work on ethics: Practitioner insights

The final activity of the workshop focused on exploring what type of resources can be designed to engage with practitioners across a variety of settings in relation to ethics. The activity also initiated a discussion around issues of design, the materiality and affordances of different communicative modes.

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