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Exploring Hybrid Sociality in the Screen Age: Potentials and Tensions in Participatory Research with Students

The increasing presence of connected screens has introduced new technology-mediated layers into human social interactions, permeating nearly every aspect of daily life including education. Being a student today entails not only attending a physical school building but also engaging in frequent screen-mediated interactions with peers, teachers, and school-related content via computers and smartphones. As a result, students' everyday educational experiences now unfold within hybrid spaces, where they seamlessly navigate between online and offline environments. For educational researchers interested in emic perspectives on how screen-mediated communication influences participation and social interaction, this shift presents a range of methodological and ethical challenges.

In my talk, I will explore and critically examine some of the potentials and tensions that have emerged from some recent ethnographic classroom studies, where I, together with fellow researchers, have developed participatory approaches involving students as co-researchers. Social interaction in hybrid spaces, distributed across both physical and screen-mediated participation and often difficult to observe, cannot easily be captured through traditional classroom ethnographic methods. From an ethical standpoint, this requires a high degree of sensitivity, as these practices often involve highly private content and therefore demand ongoing, dynamic ethical considerations. Inviting students as co-researchers has the potential to ensure that they understand the research goals and are given space to reflect on and define their own boundaries regarding what they find appropriate to share. At the same time, the ethos of participation can sometimes come into tension with researchers' interests—a tension that, in practice, calls for methodological flexibility as well as continuous critical reflection on ethics and academic values.