Educational challenges in the YouTube era

Generation Z

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The Generation Z youth of today (15 – 24 yrs.) are the first generation to use the internet since birth, seamlessly weaving together their online and offline lives. They use social media daily; make purchases inspired by social concerns, and above all use instant messaging apps to communicate their lives, brands and companies. It is no longer just about instruments, but about a network of relationships. We need to creatively educate ourselves about their world, while at the same time becoming conscious of what it means to be an insider. The author is an expert in computer science and new media.

I wrote this article after striking up a conversation with fifteen-year-old, Steven.

"I should write something about teens and how you use social media," I said. Surprised, Steven looked at me with bewilderment.

"Can I ask about the *social messaging networks* you use?" I continued. His answer caught me off guard.

"Basically," Steven said, "I only use YouTube."

"For what exactly?" I inquired.

"It's where I go to understanding things," he said. Our conversation continued for a while longer. It became clear there were no particular topics Steven wanted to better understand (except learning new gaming tricks) specifically. Rather, he looked here and there based on the latest video offerings.

Steven does everything on his phone. According to the 2018 *Pew Research Center* study entitled, "Teenagers, social media and technology"[1], 95% of US teens have smartphones and 45% say they are constantly connected. Numbers are similar in Italy and results of a mass survey of 50,000 teens this year by *Miur Generazioni Connesse Consortium,* found that only one in sixteen was not "connected" with any social network. *Generation Z* has new ways of building and traveling their life pathways.

Formal and Informal Education

Human beings have always built their culture and identity through two types of learning, formal and informal. Schools are workplaces for formal education, while family, the media, and local neighborhoods with their civic, religious, and athletic dimensions, provide non-formal education.

Borrowing a comparison from an e-learning site, 'formal' learning is like being a passenger on a bus where the driver determines the destination and speed (there are progressive

school curricula for various disciplines by grade that teachers must respect). 'Informal' learning instead is more like the travel decisions made by a cyclist, who is, free to choose the destination, route and speed of the bicycle.2

But, aspects of today's culture are undermining institutionalized teaching. Among these, let's focus on the role of media in this regard. Since the second half of the twentieth century, radio and especially TV have had major influences on informal education. Karl Popper, author of *Television: A Bad Teacher,* was well aware of this and proposed that those involved in TV production needed to obtain licenses that could be revoked if one acted in contrast to certain basic principles. His reasoning was that television producers, "whether they like it or not, are involved in mass education, a type of education that is terribly powerful and important [...]. And learning and intelligence is needed[for television viewers], for them to distinguish between what is offered as reality and what is offered as fiction."3

But radio and TV still had a shared commonality with classroom teaching: that of being a frontal system, one by which information started from one point and was directed to a class or large audience. What differentiated the two was the TV's 'remote control', however, that allowed for personalized choices of content and timing not generally present in formal learning. Usable content was already greater than that available in schools and included current world events.

Arrival of the Internet

This beginning crisis was further intensified by the Internet. Knowledge is now spread along infinite pathways and articulated via a network of connections and interactions that represent collective knowledge. No single human being owns it, organizes it, or can be its guarantor.

Furthermore, knowledge has become increasingly multicultural. The web expounds multiple points of views and 'truths" on any given subject and opened the way for fictional 'truths. Thus, it's now become vital to refine the critical thinking skills of persons who use internet media content, including newspapers. In addition, social networking has made this task even more difficult because a scholar's qualitative authority is now replaced by the more quantitative criterion of "*likes*".

Since family, religion, political party, or any organization or ideology that is a part of a teen's identity development are in crisis today as well, we can understand how those belonging to generation Z find themselves swimming alone in unchartered waters.

Checking internet algorithms

Context and content are more susceptible to manipulation and outside influences than in the past. Returning to Steven, who says he keeps updated through *YouTube* and feels free to choose from whatever is offered to him. He does not think content is tailored to him according to algorithms based on prior choices. Years ago, a film called *The Truman Show*4, featured Truman, who was raised from an infant on a TV production set, on an island. Only a girl's love could make him understand he was living in a fictional world and give him the courage to face the challenge of real life. Our teenagers are having a similar experience. Online they are imprisoned in a world built *ad hoc* for them, one where they feel free but in reality, are controlled and directed without even knowing it.

Fear of Networking on the Open Seas

Formal education can play a very important role, a role of open-mindedness, like the girl who opened life's realities to Truman. For it to be effective, however, it's important not to discard informal education's ways made available through the media and social networks. Hence the need to include media education in teacher curriculum.

"With media and technology-based teaching, there are enormous possibilities for reinforcement. This is a determinative *plus* not always guaranteed in frontal teaching lessons. Interestingly, curiosity, social communication, and perseverance are stimulated through media use and allow for emotional development in relation to learning and learning effectiveness."[5]

Here, visual images play a role. Videos provide much more information in a short time than book pages, and with greater personal involvement. That's why *YouTube* is now the top social network among teens. During moments of reading, however, it's possible to stop, assimilate and reflect. Instead video content is "drunk" without effort and there is a risk of a lack of personal reflection and discernment if space for critical reflection and discussion is not included. Today's schools would benefit from longer "collective" discussions where teachers become explorers of meaning together with students, courageous voyagers unafraid to travel the open seas of social media.

In his apostolic exhortation, *Christus vivit*, Pope Francis writes, "Some Catholic schools seem to be structured only for the sake of self-preservation. Fear of change makes them entrenched and defensive before the dangers, real or imagined, that any change might bring. A school that becomes a "bunker", protecting its students from errors "from without" is a caricature of this tendency."[6] It could be useful for Catholic institutions to reflect on this so as to model education, as Pope Francis writes in the same exhortation, on the ancient Greek mythological figure, Orpheus. Orpheus, rather than plugging the ears of his sailing companions in order to prevent them from hearing the Sirens' bewitching musical sounds, 'intoned an even more beautiful melody' in their presence instead. [7]

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1 Pew Research Center, *Teens, Social Media & Technology 2018, Complete Report*, https://www.pewinternet.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/9/2018/05/PI_2018.05.31_TeensTech_FINAL.pdf consulted on August 21, 2019.

2 Difference Between Formal and Informal Learning, https://raccoongang.com/blog/difference-between-formal-and-informal-learning/ consulted on August 31, 2019.

3 Karl R. Popper - John Condry, *Television: A Bad teacher,* edited by Francesco Erbani, The Books of Reset, Donzelli Editore, Milan 1994, quoted on http://helpp.altervista.org/karl-popper-e-leducation- of-children-in-open-society /? doing_wp_cron = 1567603981.5944449901580810546875 (consulted Aug. 28, 2019.

4 https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Truman_Show

5 Dianora Bardi, *Food for thought on learning ecosystems and their governance*, in «Tuttoscuola» n. 589, February 2019, p. 8.

6 Pope Francis, Post-Synodal Apostolic *Exhortation Christusvivit*, n. 221.

7 *Ibid.*, N. 223.