

The challenges of participatory research with ‘tech-savvy’ youth

Introduction

New media technologies now form a central part of many young people’s lives, both in and away from school. The increasing take-up of home computers with high-speed connections in many western countries and the increased use of information communication technologies (ICT) as part of the leisure lifestyles and school-based experiences of many young people have given rise to epithets such as ‘tech-savvy’, ‘GenTech’ and ‘digital natives’ to describe young people (Heywood & Elsworth 2007, McNamara 2006, Prensky 2001). Furthermore, the ‘time-space compression’ (Harvey 1989) associated with developments in global communication systems offers possibilities for networked connectedness for youth, ushering in new forms of communication, identity formation, and social relations. Despite the pervasiveness of ICT and the networked society, it must also be acknowledged that access remains uneven as many factors, including geographic and economic, continue to limit and shape the ways in which young people use technologies in their everyday lives. For researchers engaged in the study of youth, these developments in young people’s differential participation in ICT open up numerous research possibilities not only in the way young people engage with new media technologies, but also in what their participation with these new media means for them. However, despite the proliferation of studies on youth, Dwyer and Wyn (2001) note that research on the complex, ambiguous and ambivalent processes of growing up in a post-industrial society continues to be an area in dire need of further investigation. Documenting the experiences, practices and social engagements of youth as they participate in what

have been described as ‘new times’ (Hall 1996) and ‘new spaces’ (Appadurai 1996) requires the development of a conceptual and methodological framework that integrates the everyday experiences of youth with the multiple space-place connections facilitated by new media and network ICT systems. Such a framework, however, will be constituted by the very conditions of ‘reflexive modernity’ that it seeks to describe. Giddens (1990, pp. 38-39) suggests that late modernity is a time of increasing ‘reflexivity’ in which ‘social practices are constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information about those very practices, thus constitutively altering their character’ (Giddens, 1990, pp. 38-39). Underpinning this paper is the notion of reflexivity, and, in particular, ‘social reflexivity’ as a condition of late modernity. As Giddens and Pierson note:

Social reflexivity refers to a society where the conditions in which we live are increasingly a product of our own actions and, conversely, our actions are increasingly oriented towards managing and challenging the risks and opportunities that we ourselves have created. (Giddens & Pierson 1998, p. 17)

This background of the conditions that are transforming the lives of children and young people raises the issue that is central to this paper, namely, how to adapt and develop research methods relevant to contemporary conditions of late modernity. As the social realities and lived experiences of young people are different, there is not one ‘best’ approach to investigating these experiences. There are, however, as Best (2007, p. 9) notes, ‘unifying threads’ that might be useful when researching different age groups and their social circumstances. Such threads provide ‘areas for coordinates on a methodological base of conceptual and practical considerations for a more critical youth studies’ (2007, p. 9). Researchers working in youth studies and New Childhood Studies over the past two decades have developed a set of perspectives that

challenge dominant developmental paradigms, as well as provided exemplary research which addresses some of the 'unifying threads' Best considers. These include: the complexity of power and exploitation; empowering strategies for youth and children; commitment to reflexivity as part of a researcher's interrogation of self and an acknowledgement of young people as 'reflexive social agents' (Hey 1997, McRobbie 1991). A unifying thread that runs through many of these studies into children and youth is how to engage in forms of participatory research, whereby young people are recognised as agents of knowledge about their own lives and are active participants in the research endeavour.

This paper focuses on the nature of participatory research and how it can be understood and employed when researching children and youth. The aim is to provide a theoretically and empirically grounded discussion of participatory research methodologies with respect to investigating the dynamic and evolving phenomenon of young people growing up in late modernity. Initially, we review the nature of participatory research and how other researchers have endeavoured to involve young people (children and youth) in their research projects. Specifically, we discuss a sampling of relevant, recent research that was conducted with a view to managing the challenges and opportunities that come with the decision to involve young people in research in both non-networked and networked spaces. Our review of these approaches aims to elucidate what we see as recurring and emerging issues with respect to the methodological design of involving young people as co-researchers. In the light of these issues and in keeping with our aim, we offer a case study of our own research project that seeks to understand the ways in which high school students use new media and network ICT systems (including Internet, mobile phone applications,

social networking sites) to construct identities, form social relations, and engage in creative practices as part of their everyday lives. To keep within the scope of this paper, we focus on our research methodology, and thereby engage in a reflexive account of the challenges and paradoxes we encountered in the research project. In keeping with definition of ‘social reflexivity’ developed by Giddens and Pearson (1998), we use the term ‘reflexive’ to refer to the social processes of knowledge production, namely, the social conditions of making ‘conceptual distinctions and connections’ (Muller, 2000, p. 2) as well as reviewing and re-considering these distinctions and connections. From this perspective, conceptual distinctions such as ‘tech-savvy’, not only provide tools for the description of social reality, but also for its prescription and re-inscription as these terms are appropriated and re-inscribed with alternate meanings by youth. The article concludes by offering an assessment of our tripartite model of participatory research that may benefit other researchers who share a similar interest in youth and new media. Our research into young people’s engagement with new media technologies has reaffirmed for us the ways in which research is by necessity a dynamic process of visioning and re-visioning.

Participatory research: Challenges and opportunities

Participatory research with children and young people emerges from a wider societal and political understanding of children’s rights, responsibilities and relations to adults. From a policy perspective, moves to acknowledge children as citizens, who have equal rights to be heard, are integral to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 1989). Kellett et. al (2004) note that interest in conducting participatory research with young people has increased since the UNCRC.

However, as we discuss below, notions of what constitutes participatory research, the motivations for and perceived outcomes of listening to the voices of youth and children, and the practical considerations of research designs vary markedly across research in the field. Long standing issues such as power inequality, constructions of childhood and youth, and notions of children's rights continue to be negotiated between the various parties and their respective interests in the research process. In the following discussion we use children and youth interchangeably or conflate under the more generic label 'young people', as often the distinction between the two is blurred.

Participatory research aims to avoid the problem of theoretical and researcher distance from the phenomena being studied, and attempts to establish non-exploitative relations between the research team and research communities. Unlike more scientific approaches, whereby the researcher 'is placed outside and separate from the subject of his or her research, seeking an objective knowledge and for one separate truth' (Reason 1998, pp. 261-262), participatory research is part of qualitative research that sees people as 'cocreating their reality through participation' (Reason 1998, p. 262). This inside-out perspective was intended to counter the top down or outsider approach that is common to youth studies and a key element of ethnographic research (Bennett 2004, p.171). With respect to youth studies and the music scene, Bennett notes the 'ethnographic turn' that has replaced more theoretical narrative analyses of music and subcultures. However, ethnographic methodology has come under attack from different sectors of academe who have criticised the ethnographic interview and participant observation as intrusive and a form of surveillance (see Hood-Williams & Cohen 2003, pp. 34-37). As Bennett and others have noted, one of the problems with

youth studies and forms of ethnographic research has been that young people are often passive subjects, rather than active contributors. This perception of passivity is even more pronounced when the children are the subject of research. As Nieuwenhuys (2004, p. 212) notes, the differences based on age certainly complicate the nature of power between researcher and researched, but society generally regards children as passive, vulnerable, and unable to take responsibility for their own actions. However, despite researchers' attempts to be more inclusive by involving young people as co-researchers or active participants, there are significant aspects of the participatory model that need reconsideration. This point has been acknowledged by other researchers who have investigated young people's participation in research (Mannion 2007, Nieuwenhuys 2004, Kellett et. al. 2004, Alderson 2001, Cook-Sather 2002). Issues that these researchers identify relate to child-adult relations, particularly power imbalances and assumptions researchers hold about young people.

In situations where the research subject may be part of a minority group or in some way occupy a less powerful social position than the researcher, such as the relationship between adult researchers and child subjects, the power differential can be particularly acute. Kincheloe (2005, p. xii) argues that recent scholarly shifts have rejected positivist constructions of childhood, which regarded children 'as receivers of adult input and socialization strategies' and which 'routinely excluded children's voices'. Instead, he suggests that this attitude has been superseded by a new paradigm, constructed around 'a view of the child as an active agent capable of contributing to the construction of his or her own subjectivity' and this results in positioning children as 'co-participants in research—not as mere objects to be observed and categorized.' This view aligns with work undertaken by the New

Childhood Studies, which seeks to replace the dominant adult-centred studies (Best 2007, Corsaro 1997).

Despite this new paradigm's attention to the child/young adult as active agent and co-participant in research, Mannion (2007) argues that the approach of listening to the voices of young people is itself potentially framed within particular 'adultist' and totalising discourses. These discourses construct particular views of children as in need of protection or 'empowerment', and often fail to account for the specific temporal and cultural contexts that children inhabit. Mannion argues that intergenerational interactions, including research with children, should be considered as both spatial (occurring within politicised and often shifting spaces) and relational (as an expression of the power relations between adults and children). Specifically, Mannion contends that:

children's places and voices and participation are not 'stand-alones'. They are tied up with the attitudes, empowerment and participation of adults. Conversely, however, adult participation is affected by their own childhood experiences, by prevailing constructions of children/childhood, and adults/adulthood, and by the agency of children today. (2007, p. 413)

Notwithstanding the valid concerns and issues that Mannion raises about adult-child relations, participatory research with young people is becoming increasingly important, especially as researchers attempt to understand the ways in which young people negotiate the rapidly changing social and technological spaces that characterise the world in which many of them live. Young people's knowledge of, and experiences within, these spaces are often quite different from adult experience by virtue of the fact that many of them were born into a 'network society' (Castells 1996). Prensky's

(2001) coining of 'digital natives', though in itself a totalising epithet, does characterise the kind of tech-savviness that many young people display in their day-to-day lives. In order to close the gap on the generational divide, particularly as it exists between educators and educational researchers, Cook-Sather (2002, p. 3) suggests that we:

must seriously question the assumption that we know more than the young people of today about how they learn or what they need to learn in preparation for the decades ahead. It is time that we count students among those with the authority to participate both in the critique and in the reform of education.

This kind of reframing of research requires a high level of self-reflexivity on the part of adult researchers, who must grapple with these changing balances of power, and, following Mannion, the implications for our understanding of concepts such as adulthood and authority. By the term self-reflexivity here we refer to the social processes of identity construction, specifically, the ways in which young people mediate, reflect on, and appropriate the terms used by researchers to describe them and social phenomena. Put differently, young people may internalise the very language of the researcher and talk and act through this language, constituting an intimate relationship between the representation of identity and performance of identity (see Yon 2000). From this perspective, any application of participatory research principles must necessarily prompt researchers to engage in self-reflexive critique, both in terms of the assumptions underpinning adult-child power relations in the context of research, and, as Thomson and Gunter (2007) note, in the context of knowledge produced through and around the research. Social and self-reflexivity, therefore, is not only the condition for the production of knowledge, but also is 'the means for its motility and destabilization' (Muller, 2000, p. 2).

Despite the ostensibly inclusive and empowering aims of participatory research, such projects continue to face many conceptual and practical challenges. Young people's participation in research may be understood in a variety of ways, from providing spaces for their voices to be heard in their own terms, through to projects which are co-designed and co-conducted by adults and young people, and even to projects completely designed and conducted by young people themselves. Yet each of these types of participation may be challenging to achieve in practice. For example, Cook-Sather (2002, p.389) warns that we may risk 'essentializing student experiences and perspectives' in the process of seeking to capture students' voices. Furthermore, as Cross (2005, p. 334) notes, in our attempts to achieve more participatory and open research we may be pushing 'at the boundaries of research as it is conventionally conceived'. This in itself is an exciting prospect.

Compounding these dilemmas is the way in which research can never be totally free of politics or ideologically neutral. The politics of who asks the questions in research with children will inevitably be tied to adult-child power relations, as Mannion argues. However, child-led or 'insider' participatory research does not automatically explicate the 'ongoing nuances and intricacies of subjectivity' inherent in even apparently equitable research relationships (Hodkinson, 2005, p. 133). Even providing spaces in the research for the voices of the subjects can be a challenge. While Alderson (2000: 8) has argued for a renegotiation of the adult-child relationship by having researchers respect 'young children's agency and personal powers in a changing world', she also points out that it can be difficult, to involve children fully as co-researchers because funding bodies

often require detailed research designs well in advance of project commencement, which can preclude the involvement of children in the important planning phases (Alderson 2001, p. 151). In addition, Alderson asserts that research by children may appear qualitatively different to adult-led research, and framing such research requires a fundamental rethinking of what is meant by the term 'research'. This challenge of re-envisioning our work as researchers, together with the practical considerations of participatory research may account for the fact that 'much participatory research is generally adult-led, adult-designed and conceived from an adult perspective' (Kellett et. al. 2004, p. 329). More specifically, Kellett et. al. discuss several commonly perceived 'barriers' to child-led research: a 'competence barrier', a 'knowledge barrier' and a 'skills barrier' which may inhibit the development of research projects which focus on child/youth researchers as active agents. While these 'barriers' are valid in many respects, the fact that they are regarded as barriers returns us to the concerns that many of the above researchers have about the nature of participatory research and the new paradigm of children and youth as active, co-participant researchers.

The challenges and opportunities of participatory research are further complicated when research is conducted with young people across networked or non-networked spaces. In considering studies that adopt a participatory approach, we found several appeared 'place-based', that is, they were concerned with mainly non-(internet) networked activities that young people engage in as part of their everyday lives (Kellett et al. 2004, Cross 2005, Thomson and Gunter 2007, Alderson 2001). Others straddle the online and offline worlds of physical space and cyberspace (Beavis &

Charles 2005, Burnett and Wilkinson 2005, Campbell 2006). From our preliminary research of the field there appear to be limited studies that adopt a participatory design to investigate young people's engagement with online technologies. This limitation in participatory design approaches exists despite the proliferation of studies about young people and new media from ethnographic or other forms of qualitative research design (see Leander & McKim 2003, Nairn, Higgins and Sligo 2007, Fielding 2007, Alderson 2000). Our examination of studies in both non-networked and networked spaces reveals that while the researchers wanted to achieve genuine participation by their researched subjects, they relied on conventional forms of qualitative research methods – semi-structured interviews; various forms of creative writing; and video documentation. However, a few attempts were made to immerse the young subjects in the research process of design (Kellett et. al 2004), the use of research methods or tools (Alderson 2001), data collection and analysis (Thomson & Gunter 2007, Cook 2005). While all these studies demonstrate the benefits of involving young people as active, knowing participants/co-researchers, the need for researchers to commit to 'radical reflexivity' (Best 2007, 9) remains a continuing thread in the design of the research fabric. While some models of participatory research focus on the child-as-researcher, other models seek to provide spaces for the 'voices' of young people to be heard in their own terms and on issues important to them, potentially with the aim of informing policy on such issues. While acknowledging Mannion's warnings that such research has the potential to be 'adultist' in its focus or temporally and culturally specific in its relevance (Mannion 2007, p. 406-8), we suggest that young people's voices, stories and opinions are acutely needed in current considerations of the networked spaces they inhabit. This imperative is underscored by the impact of societal change on the lives of young people brought about by the growth of ICTs and

other globalising processes. These changes have transformed the experiences of young people, and the ways in which they can participate in forms of consumption and leisure-orientated activities, as well as contribute to the institutional fabric of western societies.

We turn now to our study, which commenced in 2006 and has attempted to adopt the principles of participatory research to involve high school students in innovative and agential forms of technologically-based research collaboration. In keeping with our focus on research methodology, we consider more the processes rather than the outcomes of our study.

Growing up in networked spaces: A participatory research project

Our research project arises from the perspective that Australian youth, like others living in developed countries, experience the shifting social and technical landscapes of global liquid modernity (Castells 2000, Bauman 2004). These shifting landscapes have seen the reduction in the cost and time of the movements of commodities and people over space, profound technological change and product innovation, including the evolving Web 2.0 platforms, and an information revolution that has, among other things, increased interconnectedness between individuals, groups, and institutions. The overarching question that guides our research is: ‘What does it mean to be a young person in a world characterised by rapid social, economic and cultural change?’ This question is one that many social scientists and cultural critics have sought answers to over the past decades (see for example, Postman 1982, Buckingham 2000, Wilson & Atkinson 2005, Soeters & van Schaik 2006). Our

study's focus on online and offline worlds raises significant issues that relate directly and indirectly to youth's participation in Australia's global knowledge-based economy, particularly their engagement with online technologies, and their experiences as consumers and producers of cultural materials and practices.

Our research concentrates specifically on students drawn from four high schools and the multiple and diverse online and offline worlds they inhabit. By attending to both online and offline activities, we seek to understand how cultural technologies, both 'global' and 'local', are resources drawn upon differentially by young people in the process of developing strategies for constructing 'glocal' identities (Hall 1996, Osgerby 2004), managing social relationships, and engaging in creative activities.

The study comprises two urban and two regional sites in Queensland, Australia with a total of approximately 170 students participating in the research. An equal number of boys and girls aged between 13 – 16 years was selected by the teachers from students who had volunteered to participate in the research. The aim of our research was to: examine how youth understand their own constructions of personal and collective identities and relationships as they negotiate the shifting social terrain of online and offline spaces. The purpose and scope of this paper does not allow space to engage with the data analysis and interpretation that arise from these objectives. Rather, our dual focus is on the participatory research design of the project and the self-reflexive account of our methods and approach.

As the preceding discussion explained, a participatory approach aims to be democratic and non-hierarchical – a goal which is rarely, if ever, fully realised. By adopting a participatory approach to methodology, we felt confident that youth in our project

would be given ‘voice’ in speaking about the culturally-complex ways they construct their identities and how these are bound up with the locally and globally grounded specificities of everyday life. In other words, we aimed to develop a research that would provide opportunities for students to speak freely about their ideas in both focus groups and online forums. With these considerations in mind our research was designed to counter the passive subject position, and adult-youth power imbalance, by engaging youth in an active way so that they would become narrators of their own experiences and knowledges. Our research therefore supported the fundamental idea that youth are active agents in many of the online and offline spaces they inhabit (see Jans 2004). However, the institutional constraints and conditions which govern research funding meant that we designed the research without consultation with the students who at the time of proposal submission had not been identified.

Our research methodology extended participation to the school communities by involving multiple avenues for communication and feedback from teachers and parents. We achieved this through working with teachers from the schools who volunteered to be the ‘liaison teachers’ for the project, and by briefing and dissemination sessions we offered the schools at the commencement and conclusion of the project. The diagram below (Figure 1) illustrates a macro-level participatory model that informed our research approach. Its inclusion here is intended to provide a broad map of the processes and stages of the research design from conceptualisation – to implementation – and review.

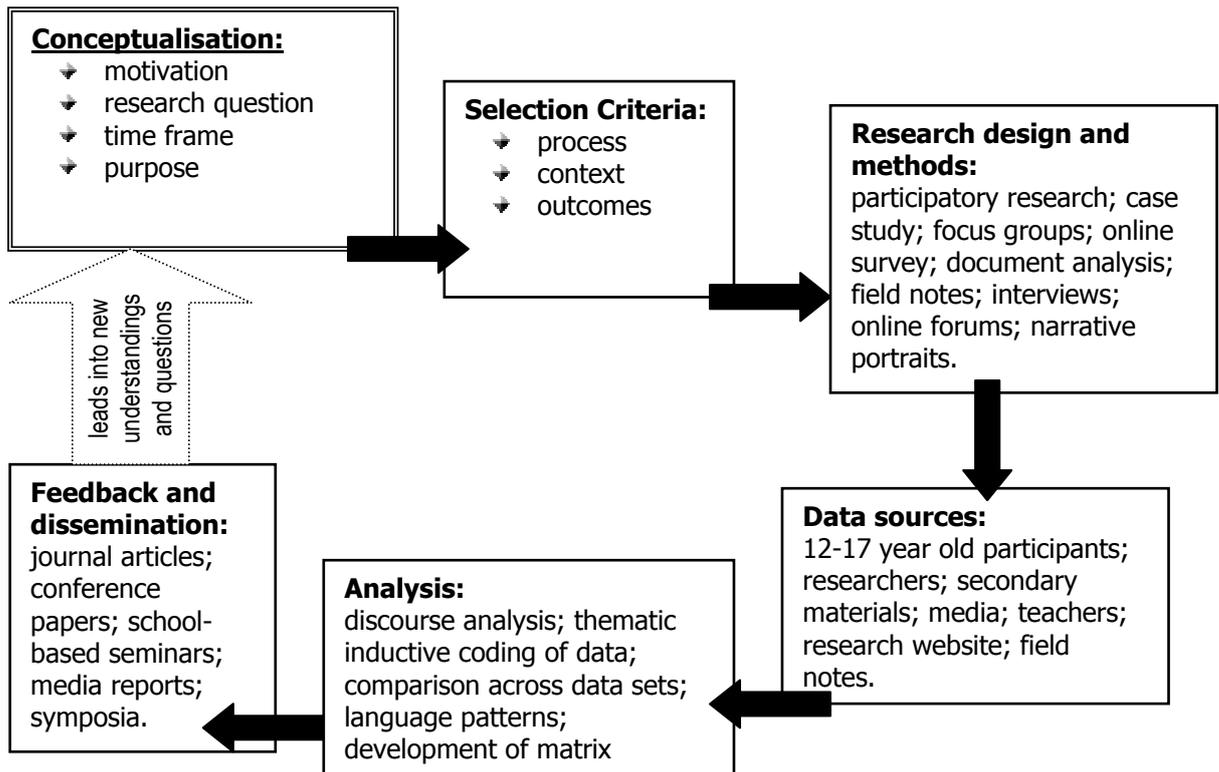


Fig. 1: Macro-level framework to guide the participatory research

Our research design and methodology developed from the above macro-level framework and proceeded from specific standpoint principles, namely, that the methodology would ensure youth's active participation, provide for multiple approaches to data collection and analysis that are responsive to both the changing dynamics of a network society and current theorising of identity under conditions of liquid modernity. As Baym (2006, p. 82) argues, high-quality, qualitative research should exhibit the following strengths: it is grounded in theory and data; demonstrates rigor in data collection and analysis; uses multiple strategies to data collection; takes into account the perspectives of participants; demonstrates self-reflexivity regarding the research process; and considers interconnections between the Internet and the life world within which it is situated. Our approach demonstrates all these features, by combining traditional ethnographic approaches (for example, case study and use of artefacts) with more recent adaptations (for example, netnography) that are conducive to behaviour in online environments. Netnography is a specific way of conducting ethnographic fieldwork in virtual environments, using 'rigorous online guidelines combined with an innate flexibility' (Kozinets 2002, p. 63). The procedure contains a number of steps and stages, but generally involves identifying and evaluating online forums or communities that will provide the 'site' of the research, collecting direct and observed data, and data analysis, contextualisation and interpretation. Netnography distinguishes itself from face-to-face ethnographic studies because it 'is based primarily on the observation of textual discourse' (Kozinets 2002, p. 64). The research website was designed to provide such a site for netnographic analysis as well as serve as a networking space (similar to Facebook) whereby students and

researchers would interact with each other. The website and online forum were set up so that students could interact anonymously, using their own 'invented' usernames, and in their own time. However, as we later discuss, students were reluctant to participate in these sites.

A tripartite model of participatory research: Advantages and limitations

As noted previously, participatory research is becoming a popular methodological approach especially with research involving young people, but any project must deal with the politicised nature of the research endeavour. As Alderson (2001) suggests, this approach can generate valid perspectives on participants' needs, values and viewpoints. Our participatory research approach provided both the research team and the research participants with spaces to explore such needs, values, and viewpoints. This was achieved largely through our emphasis on links, reflexivity, and transparency in all stages in the research process. We see these three elements as integral to the tripartite model of our participation design.

- *Links* with the school communities were maintained from the outset through: information and dissemination about the research via face-to-face meetings; correspondence (with students, parents, teachers, and principals); professional development sessions; and circulation of printed outcomes of the research. Links were also endemic to the research data as one online activity often links to others so that data were frequently cross-referenced across two or more data sets;

- *Reflexivity* was built into both the research data collection and analysis phases to ensure that non-exploitative relations between researchers and students and schools were maintained and research methods ensured reflexivity by asking questions such as: Whose interests are being served? Who benefits? Whose voices are heard? It also entailed, as we discussed earlier with reference to Giddens & Pierson (1998), the need to ensure that our actions were oriented towards managing and challenging the risks and opportunities we created;
- *Transparency* of process was maintained by a strict adherence to ethical procedures and guidelines and the public dissemination of research papers. This not only ensured transparency of process, but maintained the rigor of the research. From the commencement of the project with the schools that agreed to be part of the research, we ensured that there was a commitment to a shared purpose and that we were receptive to the needs and special circumstances of the schools and their students (for example, respectful of timetable commitments, school bus timetables, and extra-curricular activities). Therefore, by maintaining a commitment to shared agency throughout the research we attempted to create a partnership that minimised dominant–subordinate or active–passive relationships between researchers and participants.

Despite these advantages, some of the limitations of a participatory approach raised in the previous sections have provided us with an awareness of the paradoxes inherent in research practices. Mannion (2007) argues that the discourses surrounding participatory research with youth must themselves be subjected to critique in order to

reveal the relations of power inherent within them. As we noted in the previous discussion, one of the issues Mannion raises relates to the intergenerational interactions inherent in participatory research across both spatial (occurring within politicised and often shifting spaces) and relational (as an expression of the power relations between adults and children) domains (p.406). In terms of Mannion's intergenerational argument, the previous section discussed how our project attempted to flatten power hierarchies. However, we acknowledge that the very nature of academic research with school-age students makes this a somewhat impossible endeavour, despite the best intentions. Our project encouraged participation in two separate spatial zones: (i) by making informal focus group and reflexive interview spaces available for the voices of young people to be heard about issues that directly affect them; and (ii) by developing a purposeful, interactive online space, whereby through the research website, participants could respond to and ask questions on the discussion forums with their peers and the research team.

The first participatory spatial zone of the project – making the voices of youth heard in focus group interviews – was accomplished to a certain degree by the design of the semi-structured interviews in the first instance; and, in the second instance, through the publication and presentation of the recorded data. We conducted two, one-hour, focus groups at each of the four schools over a twelve month period. These sessions were audio-recorded and later transcribed, providing the data for our publications and presentations. It can be argued, however, that students' voices are ventriloquised through our own academic discourse which frames their comments through a theoretical lens that we have found most amenable for interpretation and analysis. Despite this inevitable outcome, an equally valid way of reflecting on this data flow is

to conceptualise it within Castells' (2000) notion of landscapes of global liquid modernity. In this way, the data flows (from collection to analysis to dissemination) enable the voices (adult and youth) to intermingle and move across different discursive terrains – journals, conference venues, professional development forums, university lecture theatres. Thus, rather than reify research knowledge, the flow of data can be seen as merging disparate knowledges that are forged generationally, experientially, and analytically.

The second participatory spatial zone – the research website – contains two main parts: an 'open to the public' area for publicising the project, listing research outcomes and providing biographies and contact details of the project team members, and a secure area designed for participant interaction and data collection. Within this secure area, participants could complete and submit their responses to the online narrative profile and also participate in online discussion forums, even to the extent of suggesting their own topics for discussion. To access the secure area, each participant had a unique username and password; this was contained on a special participant ID card which was issued upon the receipt of a signed permission form (see Figure 2).

Growing Up In Networked Spaces
An ARC Discovery Project at QUT and Griffith University
Website: <https://olt.qut.edu.au/edu/networkedspaces>

Participant ID:
Username:
Password:

Please go to the website to take part in the study!

Valid until: December 2008
Direct enquiries to: XXXXXXXXXX



Figure 2: Sample ID card for student participation

Participants liked the idea of membership in the project, particularly as this membership was represented by the ID cards: it was informally observed that participants were eager to show off their ID cards to their non-participating peers. Yet, despite their eagerness for membership, actual response rates for the discussion forums were minimal, which made it difficult to fulfil this participatory aspect of the research design and to conduct the netnography. Response rates for the online narrative profile activity were higher, but only when the activity was administered by the research assistant in face-to-face sessions during class time. This lurking membership versus active participation issue complicated the practical administration of the project, but at the same time, clearly reflected wider trends evident in the data. For example, students commonly reported that they enjoyed watching YouTube and followed the site assiduously, but few participants reported uploading material to the site. Thus, the research website like other social networking sites can be seen as a paradoxical space that lures participants with the promise of belonging, but in reality individuals chose their own particular forms of participation or non-participation. To extrapolate to the broader societal context, Wegner's (2002, p. 1) point that 'if it is true that the cultures of modernity are marked by universalist aspirations... it is equally true that they have given rise to all kinds of particularisms' offers a way to consider the students' actions 'as tech-savvy' youth within the participatory framework. It also brings to the fore how researchers' assumptions about young people – their perceived 'tech-savviness' – may not necessarily mean that they will be interested in participating in online forms of research design.

‘Tech-savvy’ youth: the myth of collective identities

Youth’s apparent enthusiastic take up of ICTs has resulted in them being defined as the ‘tech savvy generation’ (Dolezalek 2003) and other cyber-related epithets as we suggested in our introduction. As Foth and Adkins note, ‘in today’s networked society, e-mail, instant messaging, online e-chats and other applications are instrumental in establishing and maintaining social ties’ (2006, p. 117). The popular media have also been instrumental in fuelling the discussion about youth and their high levels of integration with new media technologies, often promoting the concept of a ‘wired’ generation, constantly communicating and existing in perpetual ambient co-presence (see for example Edwards 2006, McNamara 2006). However, the media are only partly responsible as social theorists similarly coin and circulate names for youth groups and subcultures based on membership and style (see Hebdige 1979, Sweetman 2004). Drawing on Britzman (1991), Cook-Sather notes how educators and researchers tend to fall back on ‘well-worn and commonsensical images that are, in fact, social constructs’ (2002, p. 12).

Our research project grappled with the notion of tech-savvy youth in both theoretical and practical ways. Initially, we defined this group generationally, in the sense that today’s youth constituted a ‘tech-savvy’ generation. However, we also acknowledged from the outset that young people’s actual access to technology remains uneven. Implicitly, the parameters of the project assumed that the subject group would be young people with access to and knowledge of a variety of technological applications. To achieve this ideal sample, we relied on local knowledge of colleagues for

nominating schools that were technologically progressive in their teaching and learning programs.

In our initial approach to schools, our attempts to define the concept of tech-savvy youth to principals, liaison teachers and participants proved a challenging exercise. In letters and research applications to schools and education authorities, the project was defined in the following terms: 'The research study will investigate how young people construct their own identities and form social relationships in their everyday lives, especially as this may involve technology.' Here, the term 'tech-savvy' was included in the title of the project, but not in its description, with the resulting implication that 'tech-savvy' is an automatic quality of youth. Explanations of the project to liaison teachers tended to focus on youth's knowledge of and involvement with new media technologies. In emails, phone conversations and meetings, members of the project team talked about young people's use of social networking sites, instant messaging, internet searching, mobile phone use, and multi-tasking skills.

A further challenge we faced in the early stages of the project was how to define our ideal subject group ('tech-savvy' youth) in a way that potential participants could identify with and would find appealing. This element of identification was crucial when we were seeking eligible participants. One successful strategy we used was the creation and dissemination of a promotional DVD, which was shown to students in class groups and at assemblies as part of a larger presentation to promote the project and encourage participation. Instead of simply defining tech-savvy youth explicitly, the DVD explored the concept of tech-savvy youth implicitly by incorporating a wide variety of popular cultural artefacts such as images, song lyrics, video, news articles,

and excerpts from teen fiction, and also by its fast pace, strong musical score and quickly cycling imagery (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Screen capture images from promotional DVD

The DVD was enthusiastically received by students and successful in increasing awareness of the project and encouraging student participation. We suggest that this might be because the multi-sensory, fast-paced, and pop-culture-saturated nature of the presentation echoed the media-rich environments our target group already inhabit. However, in noting the appeal of the DVD for students we are mindful of its seductive marketing potential and our complicity in its mass media manipulation. As Willis asks in relation to the complex issue of semiotic possibilities and cultural commodification: ‘Are the young becoming culturally literate and expressive in new ways, or are they merely victims of every turn of cultural marketing and mass media manipulation?’ (2003, p. 405).

While students appeared to recognise the ‘hailing’ in an Althusserian sense of the DVD, it did not necessarily mean that they understood or agreed with definitions of themselves as being tech-savvy. Indeed, the data reveal that participant knowledge about what it means to be tech-savvy remained relatively low. In the online narrative profile, respondents were asked what tech-savvy meant, and also whether they considered themselves to be tech-savvy. Of the 57 students who participated, 60% did not think that the term was appropriate to describe themselves. In analysis, this may have been because many students did not understand what the term meant: 23 students specifically mentioned in their responses that they did not know what ‘tech-savvy’ meant, and field observations by the research assistant during administration of the activity in schools reveal at least six instances where students paused in completing the narrative profile to look up the term ‘tech-savvy’ on Google. However, in one of the focus groups, nine participants discussed appropriate terminology for their generations, and described themselves as ‘cyber kids’, ‘the cyber extreme generation’ and ‘Generation Z’, and in nearly all the focus groups, participants mentioned their skills with technology with regards to the perceived

technological incompetence of parents and teachers. While these descriptions attest to their understanding of themselves as being adept users of technology, students' reluctance to use descriptors such as 'tech-savvy' can be seen as their refusal to see themselves in adult society's terms.

This point of adult-youth relationship in participatory research is taken up by Mannion, who draws on the insights of Christensen (2004), to argue that we need to 'reflexively investigate our own ideas about what it means to be 'an adult', including the categories used to describe generational categories' (2007, p. 408-9). The generational relationship can also be understood in terms of Giddens' comment that self-identity has become 'a reflectively organized endeavour' (1991, p. 5). Furthermore, as Beck (1994, p. 13) notes, 'individuals must [now] produce, stage and cobble together their biographies themselves'. In other words, 'tech-savvy' may not be part of youth's particular narrative of identity that Giddens regards comes with the lifestyle of living in late modernity. As researchers, we came to realise that in our attempts to design a project that was grounded on certain assumptions about young people, we needed to remain mindful of the condition under which our knowledge was produced, and be prepared to destabilise that knowledge when the situation demanded it.

Concluding Comments

This paper has argued the value of a participatory approach to research with young people. Participatory research, like other philosophical approaches to qualitative research, can fall between the crack that separates intention from action. The conditions which contribute to this disjuncture are varied — institutional (e.g. funding timelines and guidelines), generational (e.g. the inevitable mismatch between world views of researcher and researched), ideological (e.g. constructions of youth and the attribution of labels and young people's own labels and constructions of themselves), and practical (e.g. negotiating agreed spaces for young people's exercise of agency within competing

conditions for ethical consent from schools, parents, universities). Participatory research has enabled other methods to develop, such as Participatory Action Research, which Nieuwenhuys (2004) has used successfully in working with children living in Ethiopia and South India. The key principles of participatory research that influenced our approach stemmed from a genuine concern for reducing the power relations between researcher and researched, learning from young people's accounts of their experiences with new media, and committing to a process of self-reflexivity at all stages of the research process and its aftermath. By taking a reflexive approach to our current study on youth growing up in a networked society, we have challenged our own assumptions about the nature of participatory research and what methods are conducive to young people's active participation. In retrospect, our methodological processes highlight problematic, positive and paradoxical considerations of this approach. However, without adopting the principles of participatory research with young people these problems and paradoxes may have gone unnoticed. Given the inclusive nature of this approach to researching with young people its difficulty needs to be seen as the reason to pursue it further, in the hope of not ever 'getting it right', as such a point could mean complacency.

Our project is located in the changing technological contexts of what has become known as 'late global liquid modernity': a period where communication is place-independent; where cultural technologies facilitate new forms of sociality, identity formation, and creativity; and where the rhetoric tells us that so-called 'tech-savvy' youth constitute a new mobile global elite who engage in cultural innovations and traverse global/local spaces. However, as our research has reminded us, this rhetoric is both accurate and inaccurate. Despite attempts to categorise and bind them to collective identities, youth have always been resistant to such intergenerational tactics. As this paper has demonstrated, researchers too fall prey to the lure of labels and categories for their research subjects. It is also somewhat anachronistic, that in a period of late modernity, researchers (ourselves included) often fall back on tried and tested methods, which may not necessarily capture the unstructured, fluid, and

contradictory states of institutionalised/de-institutionalised traversals young people embark upon as part of their lived experiences in online and offline spaces. However, many young people undoubtedly have important technological skills and knowledge which can be drawn upon to assist with developing e-enabled research tools such as interactive websites. Furthermore, their familiarity with emerging tools that Web 2.0 and developing technologies offer (and will offer) may inform more user-centred participatory approaches.

Our attempt to stand back from our research has afforded us new insights about participatory research with respect to methodological issues. The macro level framework (Figure 1) developed for the project provided us with a sound methodological foundation that could be transferred to other settings and research into youth to support further evaluations of participatory research. The underpinning precepts of links, reflexivity, and transparency that informed the tripartite design proved sustainable and successful and adhered to the principles of participatory research as being non-exploitative and having self-awareness. The strength of the tripartite model is that it provides for ongoing reflection about processes at each stage. However, its limitation in terms of participatory research principles is that it is designed from the perspective and benefit of the researcher, ensuring that ethical protocols are enacted, 'voices' of the research community are invited, and sound research procedures are in place. While these elements are sound, the absence of student input renders its goals of links, reflexivity, and transparency less successful than could have otherwise be achieved. Although our research was not designed initially to have students as research partners due to the nature of its origin as an application for government funding, in revising our approach, attention needs to be given to how young people could be best involved so that process is negotiated to the satisfaction of both parties – researchers and researched. Specifically, we need to consider how researchers involve young people in ways that capitalise on their 'liquid modernity' lifestyles of flexibility, creativity, and social networking patterns to assist in capturing the ephemeral and shifting conditions in which they live.

To return to a point we made above regarding e-enabled research, one area in which students' interest in social networking could have been utilised was in seeking their ideas and design for an online communication space. Our intention to have a dedicated website available for students from the four schools to talk with each other proved unsuccessful. We assumed that students would find this a welcoming communication space, but their non-participation sent a clear message about our wrongheaded assumption. Given the popularity of social networking sites among the students, a MySpace or YouTube application or website may have proved a more successful alternative. By contrast, students enthusiastically participated in the focus groups, group interviews, and narrative profiles.

Research into youth and new technologies struggles to keep pace with the evolving technologies that shape young people's lives. However, there is a corollary, as young people too shape or adapt technology to suit their own purposes. This mutually shaping process is often missed when we take only one side of the technology and youth debate as either harmful or liberating. As this paper has demonstrated we are also in need of developing new approaches to participatory research which can work with the collaborative nature of these technologies. Young people are generally immersed in the social-technical trends of digital culture yet as researchers we tend to rely on old methodologies to investigate these new developments. And as our project demonstrates, attempts to work with familiar forms of online networking are not necessarily met with enthusiasm. Many young people utilise Web 2.0 services and applications such as blogs, Wikipedia, YouTube, Flickr, and social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook which enable more extensive and creative forms of participation than previous (Web 1.0) Internet-based services. On the other hand, many young people do not use these tools. Research into the different reasons or purposes behind this engagement/non-engagement issue has yet to be undertaken to any significant extent. While researchers have investigated how school-

aged children and youth use these technologies, they are yet to realise the potential of these new technologies as part of the design component of participatory research. Participatory research has the potential to exploit the distributive aspects and immediacy of Web 2.0 services (and its successor) to investigate the convergence between the local and global, especially how young people's uses of such services impact on their own contributions to participatory cultures.

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