

# Young Quebecers in a Situation of Precarity and their Digital Literacy Practices<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

In its latest report based on The Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) data, the *Institut de la statistique du Québec* (ISQ, 2015: 93) indicates that young people aged 16 to 24 whose education has been interrupted do not generally attain Level 3 in Problem Solving in Technology-Rich Environments (PSTRE). More specifically, only 36% of this group of young people reached higher levels (levels 2 or 3) in PSTRE compared to 55% of young people in education and 70% with a high school diploma. Yet, young people in Western countries are often portrayed homogeneously as digital natives (Warschauer, 2009). This may be explained by the fact that studies have mainly focused on 'Anglo-American or middle-class contexts' (Prinsloo and Rowsell, 2012: 271).

In the UK context the expression 'Not in Education, Employment, or Training' (NEET) is widely used. This term only serves to emphasise what young people have not achieved and offers a homogeneous portrait which does not account for their complex realities (Yates & Payne, 2006). In Québec, the term 'in a situation of precarity' is preferred over others such as NEET, disadvantaged, vulnerable or marginalised (Thériault, 2015a). Throughout this paper, the term 'precarity' will refer to the kinds of insecurity and unpredictability that can affect various aspects of young people's lives: housing, health, employment, social relationships, and so on. This expression acknowledges the fact that young people's characteristics (such as social class, neighbourhood of origin, immigration status, etc.) are not the sole causes of their difficulties, but that an absence of strong support structures (for instance free public services) and the social, historical and political context (for example, austerity measures) are in play (ibid.).

Québec has a long history of community-based programmes for young people; supporting them with various difficulties they might encounter such as homelessness, addictions, unemployment, isolation, etc. (see Lavoie & Panet-Raymond, 2011). The youth workers employed by these community-based organisations for young people increasingly use new technologies in their activities and for counselling

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purposes (Thériault, 2015b), similarly to other professionals such as social workers (Mishna et al., 2012).

This highlights an important paradox - how can youth workers use digital literacies with young people who, according to PIAAC data, have such low levels of PSTRE? Could it be possible that these young people engage in digital literacy practices that are not acknowledged in the PIAAC study? Also, is it possible that community-based organisations offer PSTRE learning opportunities to young people? Using a New Literacy Studies perspective, this paper challenges narratives about young people's digital literacy practices. Specifically, the aims of this paper are: 1) to describe some literacy practices young people in a situation of precarity are engaging with, and 2) understand how community-based organisations can beneficially draw on these practices and foster young people's learning.

This paper begins by introducing the theoretical perspective selected—the New Literacy Studies (NLS)—and a few key concepts (for instance, curation and design). It then goes on to introduce the methodology used to collect and analyse the data. In the following sections, two key themes are presented. First, young people's uses of digital technologies to manage and (re)organise their social relationships are discussed. Second, the importance of digital technologies for identity work and curation will be presented. For both key themes, I will also explain how the community-based organisations that took part in the study drew on young people's practices during their activities. Finally, concluding comments are made regarding potential implications for youth work and education practices and policies.

### **Digital literacy practices**

This paper follows the New Literacy Studies (NLS) perspective that considers literacies as social practices rather than individual and technical skills (Barton & Hamilton, 1998). Within this perspective, researchers pay particular attention to what people do with literacy in their everyday lives, including their attitudes, feelings, values, and social relationships associated with such practices. According to Barton and Lee (2013: 179), 'writing activities on the internet are not separable from people's lived experiences off the screen'. This signifies that the online-offline dichotomy is not productive. What is happening online cannot be studied and understood separately from people's everyday lives off the screen. Thomas (2007; 173) adds that the 'online world is not divorced' from what young people do in their offline everyday lives. The difficulties that young people might encounter off the screen (for instance bullying) are likely to also take place online (ibid.).

Barton and Lee (2013: 3) also explain that '[i]t is important to make clear that technologies themselves do not automatically introduce changes in life'. This echoes Street's (1984; 1993, 2001) concept of the autonomous model of literacy. This model conceives literacy as an 'autonomous variable' (Street, 2001: 431) that is not bound to any social context; a variable that can automatically induce changes in people's lives. The autonomous model of literacy, prominent in the media, inspires simplistic causal associations such as seeing low literacy skills causing criminality or poor health. Critical of this model, Barton and Lee (2013) prefer to talk about digital literacies in terms of affordances instead of effects.

'Designing' (Kress, 2003) and 'Curating' (Potter, 2012) are two affordances that NLS researchers and others have studied. Design refers to how people mix different modes (e.g. video, images, text) to produce new meanings from available resources (Kress, 2003). For example, the content posted on young people's Facebook pages can originate from extensive research and reading online about a specific topic such as health and social relationships (Thériault, 2015b).

Curation relates to the representation of the self and the self-conscious construction of identity. Potter (2012) uses the metaphor of museum curatorship to explain what people do on digital platforms; constantly creating different exhibitions. In her study of trainee hairdressers and their digital literacy practices in the UK, Davies (2014) explores young women's identity curation. She suggests that '[t]heir textual identity performances both reflected but also affected how they saw themselves, their world and their place within it' (ibid.: 72). In other words, their Facebook profile was their online 'representative'; the young women's 'online embodiment' (Farquhar, 2012) but this virtual image also affected their own perception of themselves (see also Taylor, 2016, on online embodiment and queer-identifying religious youth). Based on his ethnographic study on Facebook conducted in Trinidad and Tobago, Miller (2011: 179) also notes a similar phenomenon. He explains that Facebook allows people to see 'a visible objectification of [themselves]' that helps them to 'discover who [they] are'.

Miller (2011) also mentions that Facebook brings together networks that are usually not related with each other (e.g. family and friends) and links together friends from different time periods or domains of life. Davies (2014) describes Facebook as a dynamic space constantly reinvented by the 'discourses' of the account owner, but also those of their friends. According to boyd (2006), the number of friends on Facebook defines the size of the 'space' created by a Facebook account's owner and their friends online. The more friends one has, the bigger this space is. Miller (2011: 175) talks about Facebook in terms of an "aggregate of private spheres" that creates an open and public place. This means that an individual does not have complete control of their identity curation and personal online space.

Online literacy practices and literacy practices in general are consequently important objects of study because they offer a window on people's identity construction, the development of their social relationships and interactions across various domains of life.

## **Methodology**

This paper draws on a study that aims to understand the literacy practices used in community-based organisations in Québec and their relations to those of the young people attending their activities. The study was ethnographic and participatory, and received ethical approval from the FASS Research Ethics Committee at Lancaster University.

The two community-based organisations for young people (*Le Bercail* and *L'Envol*) which took part in this study were situated in the same mid-sized city in the Province of Québec (Canada). These organisations offered services to young people aged between 16 and 30 years old. Their services included (either at one or both organisations) a youth shelter for runaways, supervised apartments, structured workshops, and counselling services.

My approach to digital literacy was similar to that of the anthropologist Daniel Miller (2011). I combined participant observation in physical settings with interviews. The importance of digital literacies emerged from the participant observation sessions. Both organisations had a small computer lab (4 computers at *Le Bercail* and 5 at *L'Envol*) which the young people could use for personal and project related activities. The organisations also offered other types of technological equipment such as digital cameras, screens, projectors, video cameras and sound systems. The participants occasionally showed me their Facebook accounts or their text messages, but I was more interested in the interaction and discussions arising around these texts (e.g. conversations on how they would select pictures to put online and why; where they would find the content they put online: pictures, poems, thoughts, etc.).

In May 2012, I conducted approximately 122 hours of participant observation in the two organisations over a period of two months. The study had three phases: 1) initial data collection (April and May 2012), 2) participatory analysis workshops (April 2013) and 3) dissemination (October-November 2015). This paper only focuses on the data collected during the first phase. In total, 27 people took part in the participant observation sessions. In addition, 21 participants were interviewed: 14 young people and 7 youth workers. Specific questions were asked to the young people about their uses of digital technologies during the research interviews. For example, I asked them if they were using the Internet or a mobile phone to communicate with other people. I also asked them to make a list of the websites

or applications that they were most regularly using; with whom and why. The data selected for this paper was analysed with the software QSR NVivo following a content analysis approach (Gibbs, 2008).

## Findings

In this section I present the findings concerning two key themes that have emerged from my analysis. The first one relates to young people's uses of digital technologies to manage and (re)organise their social relationships and the second to the importance of digital technologies for identity work and curation. For both themes, I will explain the relations I observed between young people's practices and the community-based organisations' activities.

During the research interviews conducted with the young people in 2012, the interviewees said a lot about how they used digital technologies to learn new things, to access cultural products, to solve problems, to express themselves, to communicate with friends and family, and so on. They were using various devices such as mobile phones, laptops, digital cameras, projectors, video game consoles, etc. The vast majority mentioned using Facebook, Google, an email account, YouTube, and text messages. In the following sections, I selected only a few examples of some of the young people's practices. This opens only a small window onto their rich and complex practices that I observed or that they shared with me.

### *Management and (re)organisation of young people's social relationships*

The analysis suggests that digital technologies (especially mobile phones and Facebook) were the cornerstone of the young people's social lives. For example, text messages were used to communicate with friends and family and organise their social lives, arrange get-togethers or plan social activities. Facebook was also used by a majority of young people to keep in touch with friends and share pictures, thoughts and videos. One of them was Yoan, a young man at Le Bercaill, who mentioned using Facebook frequently. At the time of the interview in 2012, Yoan mentioned that he used to have two Facebook accounts:

[...] my first Facebook account got hacked [...]. So that's why I was somehow forced to delete it. Basically, I've deleted it. But you know I could not log in. Someone had changed my password or ... Anyway, it was weird. Then, I created another Facebook account [...]. At one point, I said, "Oh, I'm going back. I'll try to log into my old account." Then, my Facebook worked. [...] I deleted my old one because there was ... First, I had too many friends that I did not even know. [...] They came to talk to me, and it annoyed me. And secondly, it's because it was becoming annoying. [...] There were inadequate pictures. People were rambling

shit. So, I had to change my circle of friends.

Yoan, Le Bercail, 15-05-2012

Yoan said that he had too many 'friends' on his old account; people he did not know, even from different countries such as France and Italy. This is not a practice he wanted to pursue on his new account. He wished to only have friends he knew personally. He also explained that the content (pictures and comments) posted by his 'friends' on his wall (now called timeline) was generally not appropriate. For instance, Yoan showed me pictures of himself smoking marijuana at a party. Yoan realised that he needed to change his network of friends. Creating a new Facebook account was the solution he found to this problem.

Hugo at *L'Envol* and Jérémie at *Le Bercail* also shared similar stories in relation to their Facebook accounts. They did not feel comfortable with the content posted by some of their 'friends'. They were unhappy about the "version of themselves" (Davies, 2014) that their Facebook pages conveyed. Yoan and Hugo were especially feeling uncomfortable about content related to drugs, alcohol, and violence. Jérémie decided to reduce the number of friends he had on Facebook, while Hugo decided to definitively quit Facebook in order to keep his distance from some friends he associated with his past. They sought better control over the content posted on Facebook and also wished to redefine themselves, producing different 'online embodiments' (Farquhar, 2012).

It is reasonable to assume that Hugo, Jérémie and Yoan were going through a transitional period in their lives at that time. These three young men were attending activities in community-based organisations in order to make some changes in their lives. For instance, Jérémie wanted to find stable employment and Yoan wanted to go back into education. Hugo was trying to stay away from drugs and alcohol consumption.

Hugo, Jérémie and Yoan's examples relate to the idea of 'cleaning up the social network' also observed in other studies with young people in Québec (Bergier and Bourdon, 2009; Supeno and Bourdon, 2013). It seems that when young people go through an important period of transition in their lives they may feel the need to change their group of friends. This phenomenon seemed to take place 'online' and 'offline'. They would discard the friends that did not fit anymore with their new perception of themselves. Young people might decide to take their distance from some friends they perceived as having a bad influence on them (Bourdon, 2009). This is a conscious decision made in order to stabilise their lives and potentially improve their situation of precarity (Supeno & Bourdon, 2013). According to Bourdon (2009: 107), this strategy is 'widely used to support an important transition which might be retarded or prevented by the original social network' [my translation].

According to Miller (2011) Facebook is a juxtaposition of networks (family, friends, co-workers, etc.) and one can feel a tension while making major changes to their lives as parts of their Facebook friends might not correspond to their new personal aspirations. Facebook might support this major 'cleaning up' since it offers a visual overview of one's social network.

Interestingly, I observed an activity at *Le Bercail* that specifically focused on the 'cleaning up the social network'. Ève-Lyne, a youth worker at *Le Bercail*, presented a film about Facebook called '*Catfish*' to the group of young people. This film tells the story of a man who falls in love with a young woman on a social network site and begins an online relationship with her. By trying to meet her in person, he realises that she does not exist and was created by another woman. Ève-Lyne used this film as a starting point to discuss the young people's uses of Facebook. The young people talked about what they did on Facebook and the people they were in contact with online. At some point Ève-Lyne said: 'We don't have 1,000 friends in real life. Sometimes it's good to do some 'housekeeping' on your account.' The young people reacted positively to this. For example, Julien, a young man at *Le Bercail* said that he had 2,339 friends on his current Facebook account but would like to create a new account since doing the 'housekeeping' on this one would take too long. At the end of the activity, Ève-Lyne asked the young people to look at their Facebook page and think about how they could improve its security settings.

Even though Ève-Lyne frequently used Facebook—both in her personal and professional lives—she adopted a critical stance towards it. She created an opportunity for the young people to critically think about their uses of Facebook. She wanted to make them aware of the continuum between what is going on 'online' and the effects (both positive and negative) that it might have on their 'offline' lives. This activity organised by Ève-Lyne supported the young people in making changes to their social networks, an important transition that they were perhaps already engaging with.

### *Identity curation and self-expression*

Many young people also mentioned using Facebook to express their feelings, a function that can be associated with identity curation (Potter, 2012; Davies, 2014). Young people selected and posted content that corresponded to the representation of themselves that they wanted to share with others. This was done by a process of design and curation that entailed selecting existing materials and modifying, reinterpreting and reconceptualising them on their Facebook pages.

For example, Darya, a young woman at *Le Bercail*, showed me pictures of her family, music videos, images, and quotes that she had posted on Facebook. One of the images showed the back of a young

woman with the following sentence: 'Love killed her soul, her body seeks revenge'. The young woman on the image resembled Darya; with long black hair. Darya told me that she really liked the image, but did not fully understand the text. She had found it on Google Images while looking for quotes to post on her Facebook account. Kelly-Ann, at *Le Bercaïl*, would also type "quotes about love" on Google and look to see if any of these represented how she felt and if so would post it on her wall (timeline). Kelly-Ann, Darya and others in the study would carefully pick quotes, images, videos that would convey a certain image of themselves as their 'online embodiment' (Farquhar, 2012).

At *Le Bercaïl* and *L'Envol* I observed many activities that also drew on curation and design practices. Figure 1 shows a flower pot that Laurence painted on the first week of her participation in the programme at *Le Bercaïl*. This activity was led by Ève-Lyne. She gave all the young people a terracotta pot and asked them to paint it in a way that could represent who they are. Once the pots were painted, the young people planted tomato seeds in them.

**Figure 1: Laurence's flower pot**



Laurence, *Le Bercaïl*, 11 April 2012

Ève-Lyne told the group that they should first select a few images. She invited the young people to use the computers available on the premises of the organisation to find them. The young people used Google Images and entered keywords that could lead them towards images they liked and could copy onto their pot. For example, Laurence entered the word 'Tim Burton' in the research engine, the name of an artist and film director she is a big fan of. This search online brought Laurence to see pictures of Tim Burton's *Alice in Wonderland* film. She then selected an image of Alice falling into the rabbit hole. On the other side, Laurence painted the following sentence: 'A different kind of human'. I asked her why

she had selected this quote and she told me that a friend once told her this sentence and that she did not want to be like everyone else. Laurence also made her own mix of colours to create this cyan hue. This was a long process of design and curation and the image selected by Laurence was technically difficult to paint. This flower pot was in a way Laurence's embodiment or representation of herself to the group, which shares some similarities with Daria's (and the vast majority of the other participants') online practices. This was reinforced by Ève-Lyne's concluding comments at the end of the activity. Indeed, she told the group that if they took good care of the seeds, they would develop as plants, and would eventually produce tomatoes. She explained that at *Le Bercail* they would be able to grow and develop as a person if they would take care of themselves. She used this metaphor to illustrate what the young people could learn at *Le Bercail*.

### **Conclusion and implications for practice**

Based on the PIAAC findings (ISQ, 2015), policy-makers could be tempted to argue that young people in a situation of precarity urgently need to improve their PSTRE skills. However, teaching PSTRE out of context does not seem like a productive idea and young people are likely to perceive such education provisions negatively. As the data presented above suggest, young people in a situation of precarity and whose education has been interrupted already engage in a wide range of digital literacy practices. Yet, these are probably not addressed in the PIAAC study.

Community-based organisations such as *Le Bercail* and *L'Envol* seem like constructive settings where young people can continue to learn about new technologies. From the examples presented above, the youth workers also seem to already understand the importance of drawing on young people's practices and lives. Encouraging curation and design practices (both offline and online) appeared to support young people in the period of transition they were going through. In general, a better knowledge of young people's digital literacy practices could help youth workers to adapt their activities to their realities and needs.

It is also important to emphasise the fact that the use of digital technologies involves more than skills. Similarly to Thomas (2007), I observed that the difficulties experienced by the young people in their everyday lives were also being played out online. This means that the situation of precarity they were experiencing was also shaping their online practices. Difficulties regarding young people's identities, social networks, health, financial situation, and social relationships were being played out on and offline. This signifies that digital literacy practices cannot be taught out of context and the situation of precarity experienced by young people must also be acknowledged in PSTRE education.

As I mentioned before, and drawing on Barton and Lee (2013), it is not because people have access to a computer and the Internet that they would automatically learn new things and break their isolation, for example. Adopting an autonomous view of digital literacies that would focus on the acquisition of appropriate skills would not be useful with the young people at *Le Bercail* and *L'Envol*. The two organisations were already engaging in reflective and non-judgemental discussions about the use of digital technologies (e.g. Facebook and YouTube). I suggest that the fact that computers were available on the premises of the two organisations was an appealing element for the young people. Young people could use these computers before or after an activity or during break time. At *L'Envol*, there were periods of time allocated when the young people could use the computer lab for their personal purposes. The activity organised by Ève-Lyne about Facebook and other situations observed indicates that the organisations were not just offering access to computers and the Internet, but were also supporting young people in learning how to use them.

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