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Exploring Ethical Issues in Relation to the Digital Practices of Young Children: A Collaborative Workshop for Practitioners and Researchers

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Exploring Ethical Issues in Relation to the Digital Practices of Young Children: A Collaborative Workshop for Practitioners and Researchers

Abstract

In this paper we present a possible format for a workshop-training event designed to engage practitioners with ethical issues surrounding an emergent topic: experiences of young children (aged between 0 and 8) with digital media and technologies. The workshop-training event is set up as a collaborative discussion space between researchers/facilitators and participants/practitioners seeking a first exploration of the topic, where research on technology and learning is being carried out intensely during recent years, including in the field of Education. We draw the methodology of the workshop as well as the theoretical framing on ethics from qualitative research traditions, and the space is conceived as a flexible and adaptable work-plan that can be implemented or adapted across a variety of professional and training scenarios. To discuss and illustrate the implementation of the workshop we draw from the experience of a first workshop event organized with a heterogeneous group of participants that included researchers, educators and practitioners in the fields of early childhood, digital technologies and educational services in the context of an international research network meeting in the area of young children's digital literacies. The positive experience of the workshop points towards the potential that workshop-training events have as a methodological tool in research that enables situated, collaborative and community-based thinking about emergent topics which are interdisciplinary in nature.

Keywords: Ethics, Situated Ethics, Collaborative Work, Participatory Research, Co-Production of Knowledge, Professional Workshop, Early Childhood, Technology, Digital Practices.

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Acknowledgements

1. Introduction and background

Research focusing on the benefits and challenges associated with children's use of technology and the Internet has, until very recently, mainly targeted 9-16 years olds (for example, the EU Kids Online research carried out since 2006 (Lobe, Livingstone, Ólafsson, & Vodeb, 2011; Livingstone, Haddon, Gorzig, & Ólafsson, 2011). Over the past few years, however, the digital practices and literacies of children under eight have been the focus of relevant research, and the area of study is rapidly growing (Sefton-Green, Marsh, Erstad, & Flewitt, 2016; Chaudron, Di Gioia, & Gemo, 2018). Increasingly, research shows that 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). Since they are going online at an increasingly younger age, "young children's lack of technical, critical and social skills may pose [a greater] risk" (Livingstone et al., 2011, p.3). Research also points at the importance of the home and other social spaces (e.g. libraries, museums) to understand children's appropriation of technology (Plowman, McPake, & Stephen, 2008; Galera, Matsumoto, & Poveda, 2016; Kumpulainen & Gillen, 2017), and its implications for their (later) learning in school (see, for example, Sefton-Green, et al., 2016; Livingstone, Mascheroni, Dreier, Chaudron, & Lagae, 2015; Plowman, 2015). However, the substantial increase in technology usage by very young children has not been accompanied by methodological research in the area and so the emergent field of research lacks a deep reflection on the appropriateness of methodologies and ethics when researching the digital practices of children under eight. . Further, very few resources have been developed to respond to the growing demand from early years professionals and practitioners for guidance regarding how to approach young children's engagement with digital technologies (Marsh, Kontovouki, Tafa, & Salomaa, 2017). This shortage of working tools extends to concerns around ethics, an aspect increasingly present in public debates and policy-legal discussions about the place of digital technologies and media in children's lives (Staksrud, 2015; Livingstone & Third, 2017; Flewitt, in press).

In this context, this brief paper, presents a workshop experience designed to co-engage researchers and practitioners in the early years from a wide variety of settings (or practitioners in the non age-specific area of children and digital media) around ethical questions and issues. With practitioners we mean caregivers, primary teachers, social educators, social entertainers, advocates, families and other early childhood professionals such as psychologists or speech therapist. From our perspective, collaboration between researchers and practitioners is an opportunity to tackle the challenge of ethics together and to advance a possible ethical framework collaboratively to become a point of reference in European research. Practitioner-researcher collaboration is a way to shape the main lines of research in an emergent field and to agree on a working agenda (Lunt, Shaw, & Fouché, 2010). It also is a way to contribute to these debates by incorporating different perspectives and bridge the divides between research / researchers and practitioners of childhood. Considering this context, our proposal starts from a two-part assumption around ethics. First, discussions about 'ethics-childhood-digital technology' intersection mainly gravitate around developing situated "standard of reasonableness" for practice, which guides "to wise solutions, often less than ideal but better than absolutely minimally acceptable" (Kopelman, 1997, p.282). Flewitt (in press) problematises the sole dependence on universal ethics code

when researching young children's digital literacy practices, and argues in favor of a view of ethics as something situated and integral to methodological choices, so that qualitative researchers can approach ethics in a way that is more respectful of participants' perspectives and backgrounds. Secondly, we assume that responding to these ethical principles - whether in research or professional practice- is an ongoing process open to negotiation and renegotiation with key participants and stakeholders (e.g. young children, their families, educators, etc.). This is in contrast to a view of ethics as something that is completed primarily at the beginning of a study through "box-ticking" procedures (Moriña, 2017; Flewitt, in press). In short, "recipes" are useless and what we need are tools that can nourish a critical attitude that will enable practitioners and researchers to face particular ethical challenge in particular contexts continuously (Graham, Powell, Taylor, Anderson, & Fitzgerald, 2013).

This framing of ethics in research and practice is what makes relevant incorporating methodological principles and procedures from participatory action research (Glass et al; 2018) and ethnographic experimental collaborative research (Estalella and Sánchez-Criado, 2018; Kullman, 2013). Specifically, we conceive a workshop as an opportunity for facilitators and participants to co-assemble a *device*, a material and interactional space through which ethical issues (in this case) can be discussed and framed (Rupper, Law and Savage, 2012). Further, the set-up that sustains the workshop should be seen as a meeting space among participants who may only partially share interests and initial questions, bring different sets of experiences and may bring out different implications and understandings (Sánchez-Criado and Estalella, 2016). This article presents a brief outline of the workshop goals, initial scripts and materials we designed to engage practitioners. It also illustrates how these materials emerged in a first working session organized for a group of twelve participants representing a variety of research and professional backgrounds. We conclude with ideas for future iterations of the workshop drawing from our own critical assessment and the participant feedback we gathered after the first event. Obviously, new implementations of the workshop will need adaptations of the proposed outline to the specific goals of the event, the needs of participants and the time and material conditions under which other versions of this workshop will be implemented.

2. A workshop-training event on researching the digital life of children between 0-8 years

Aims of the workshop

The objectives we set out for the first workshop can be summarized in two goals: (1) Create a space of exchange where concerns, experiences and practices around ethical issues and dilemmas in the area of young children and digital technology can be compiled, explored and discussed collaboratively; (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 we video and audio-recorded the session with the consent of participants. We also took photos of the collaborative texts being produced by the participants (i.e. on the blackboard) and other relevant texts like the notes

of the facilitators. Some of these illustrations and summaries of the discussions are provided below.

The script

The first part has a broad approach focused on bringing out and discussing issues related to the digital activities of young children. The second part focuses specifically on ethics and puts into dialogue research-based ethical frameworks with professional practices. We will first present the script we used in the particular event, and later we will discuss suggestions regarding how the model may be replicated or used elsewhere.

Figure 1 summarizes the organization of the first part of the workshop (I), dedicated to the introduction and warm-up activities. This first part is structured in three sub-themes or phases, starting on the sharing of concrete experiences (I), moving to an analytical stage (II) and then shifting to a space where new perspectives are built collaboratively (III). A first general theme attempts to gather participants' viewpoints and practical aspects / challenges that emerge from everyday experiences by means of a simple dynamic which we believe could be applicable to a wide variety of interlocutors. The second and third themes set an exploration of particular topics that reflect the current concerns and interests of the group and these are, next, analysed collaboratively to identify the cross-cutting themes. This approach to the concerns and interests of the group was a key for the process of knowledge co-construction in the event since it generated materials for the next phases of the workshop, and thus allows to adjust the discussion to participant's interests and experiences.

FIRST PART OF THE WORKSHOP

PHASE I. 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).

a) Presentation of each participant (i.e. professional experience, expectations regarding the event) and the objectives of the meeting.
b) Each participant summarises his or her general opinion in relation to technology and childhood in **three to five descriptors / words** and reports them to the group (e.g. use a traditional white-board or a collaborative online tool to compile responses). The facilitator might re-organise all the words in core themes in order to identify the representations of the group around key issues.
c) Each participant identifies and writes in 'post-its' **three to five challenges / main concerns** in the context of work / professional activity related to digital technology and young children. If the question is too general, participants can focus on incidents/challenges emerging over their last six months of practice/experience. These notes are saved for the second part of the workshop (optionally, one incident is shared by each participant to close this part of the session).

PHASE II. 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).

a) Divide participants into smaller (4-6 participants) and diverse groups (in terms of profession and level, securing one facilitator per group, when possible), and discuss definitional issues in specific areas of interest selected for the workshop.

Literacy
What does reading / writing mean?
Advantages and disadvantages in the use of screens and other digital tools/devices?
What guidelines could be pointed out?

Creativity
What does creativity mean in childhood (the 0-8 age range)?
Advantages, disadvantages of using digital technology to foster children's creativity?
What guidelines could be pointed out?

b) Gather the larger group and allow each group to share what they discussed before. The facilitator might sum up the main common points and differences in a brief, closing speech.

PHASE III. 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).

As a group, discuss how digital technologies can promote or become obstacles to:
a) **Accessibility, inclusion and equity**
b) **Collaboration, participation and interaction**

Some questions that can support this discussion are: How do you understand each of the issues listed above in your work environment? How do you approach them? What place do digital technologies have in them? Have you defined guidelines or principles in your work/professional environment?

Figure 1: A general overview of the first part of the workshop-training event on digital technologies and young children

The second part of the workshop focuses specifically on ethics and it is structured in three sub-themes/segments (IV-VI). The starting point of the conversation are ethical concerns and guidelines as they are often formulated in institutional research settings and research practices. The objective is that professionals / practitioners engage with these materials and progressively develop, if necessary, alternative perspectives related to their own working practices and perspectives. The workshop closes by scoping with participants the type of resource (e.g. ethical guidelines in written form, a public clearing-house/agency, etc.) that could be valuable in their work setting and the communicative/media format this resource could have.

IV. Principles to think about ethics: From research to practice

This activity confronts participants directly with broad research principles that range from practically universally agreed upon ethical principles in research with human beings to

ethical concerns that are emerging in digitally mediated scenarios (as reviewed by Ardèvol, personal communication 14 November 2017; Estalella & Ardévol, 2007).

a) Participants are divided into small groups in a way that maximizes diversity within each group and includes one facilitator per group if possible. The groups are asked to share how the four basic ethical principles in Figure 2 are promoted / compromised / guaranteed in each of their working contexts and, specifically, in relation to digital practices and digitally mediated work with children. If necessary, facilitators explain briefly how these four principles are understood in research processes and provide their own research examples of situations in which the principles are promoted or compromised (this illustration should be brief and aimed at facilitating that participants generate their own critical incidents, rather than discuss the instances provided by facilitators).

| 1	Do not cause harm
2	Protect from risk
3	Guarantee consent / assent
4	Guarantee anonymity / authorship

Figure 2: Four ethical research principles in digitally mediated contexts

b) Participants discuss these principles and attempt to identify commonalities and gaps or needs. The discussion might lead to formulate complementary or alternative ethical principles relevant to the participant's own settings, if this seems to be the case. As an example, in our workshop experience the discussion about these principles led practitioners/professionals to raise two issues that are not usually foregrounded in discussions of research ethics, which we point out here as an illustration of how divergences can emerge without much difficulty (but do not discuss in detail):

1. The binding and guiding nature of existing legal frameworks (e.g. around data protection, professional confidentiality, institutional regulations, etc.) is a much more powerful element in decision-making than ethical principles or deontological research codes.

2. An ethical concern around how the "quality/reliability" of the information that families, children and (even) practitioners access and how this information influences decision-making. In a context in which information is quickly and easily accessible to a variety of social agents through digital platforms and search engines, some participants in the workshop raised concerns about the impact of commercial interests and digital algorithms in the information that is more readily available and has, for example, more influence on how families make decisions regarding education and child-rearing.

<u>V. Ethical challenges: From practice to context</u>

a) Participants are invited to return to the challenges and concerns they identified and wrote down in 'post-its' in the first activity of the day (Activity I, Figure 1). Drawing from the previous conversation, participants are invited to individually re-examine the stated concern to see what ethical principles (if any) are compromised/promoted and then a new global analysis is organise using a visual tool (Figure 3). If they continue considering that what they identified in Activity I reflects a relevant challenge in their work setting, then participants are invited to place/stick their post-it within the space created by the framework presented in Figure 3 (which ideally is presented and explained in a large whiteboard or poster that participants can later use). The framework (Estalella & Ardévol, 2007) invites participants to decide how their incidents are situated along two continua: (a) from situations that range from more public to more private spaces; (b) in relation to the nature of materials and personal information, how they may be more or less sensitive for the children who are part of their professional practice. Both issues are key aspects in social debates about "risk" and children in the digital age (Livingstone et al., 2017).
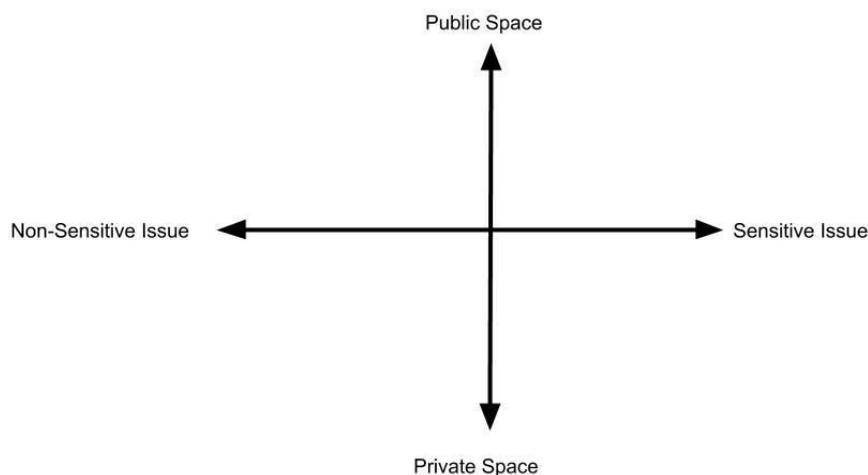
Figure 3: A spatial framework to situate ethical incidents / challenges

b) Once all participants have placed their examples in the framework and the results are visible to the full group, participants break up into smaller groups and discuss the patterns or clusters that have emerged from their responses. For example, Figure 4 captures the lay-out of the concerns and incidents that were identified in our initial workshop and some of the clusters that could be tentatively pointed out for discussion:
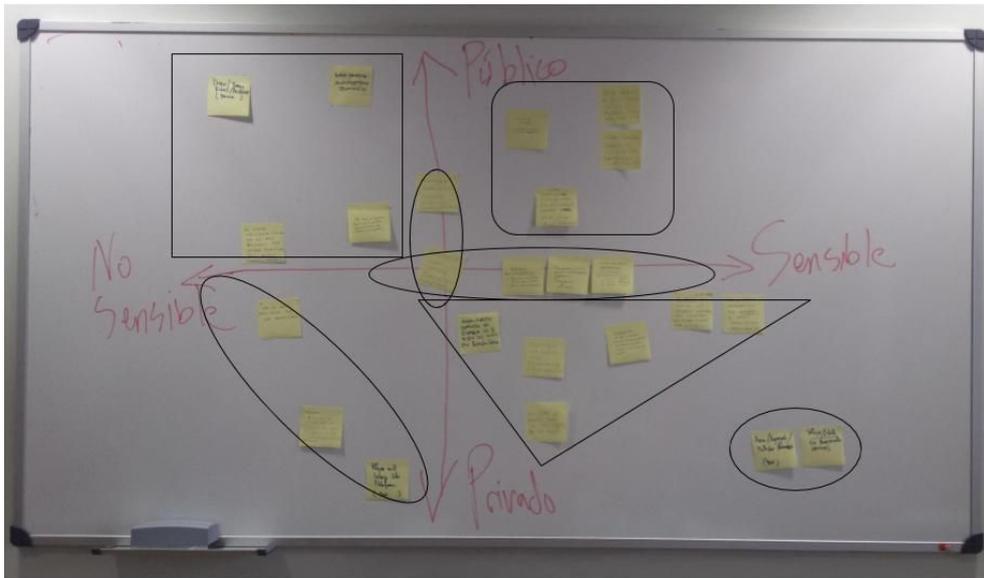
Figure 4: Placing incidents/concerns within a framework

VI. Instruments to work on ethics: Practitioner insights

The final activity of the workshop draws from our previous experience with research training events (Aliagas et al; 2017) and focuses on exploring what type of resources to engage with ethics would be more useful for practitioners across a variety of settings. The activity also initiates a discussion around issues of design and the materialities and affordances of different communicative modes. Depending on time and the workshop format this activity can mobilize different materials (e.g posters, cardboards, coloring materials, digital tools, exhibits, etc.) or may be limited to a "conversation" outlining potential issues. In the case of the workshop experience discussed here, the activity was limited to a discussion about these issues - but see (Authors, 2017) for an experience with more concrete material outcomes. Also, depending on the organization of the group each part can be broken down into sub-groups or sub-themes. Figure 5 summarizes the issues to be addressed in this part of the activity:

Type of resource:
(This part explores what type of resource practitioners demand or would see a more relevant to their concerns around ethics). The critical issues involves discussing the organization and rationale for this hypothetical resource:
      Should it contain specific guidelines / principles?
      Should it be relatively closed or open?
      Should it present critical questions or focus on best practices?
      Should it draw from specific examples / incidents or have a more general orientation?

<u>Format / Materiality</u>:
(This part focuses on what this resource would "look like" and the benefits/shortcomings of different realizations)
        Print-based, digital or multimedia?
        Language-based / written document, visual, multimodal?
        Formal or informal tone?
        "Narrative" or "expository" discourse?
        (...)

<u>When</u>:
(This part explores the context and moment that would be more useful to engage with the instrument and to facilitate a space to think about ethics)
        Initial and/or in-service training?
        Preventive/general or reactive to critical incidents?
        During discrete moments/periods or a resource open to continuous exploration?

<u>Who</u>:
(This section engages with the different social actors involved in working around ethics, including the agents who "provide" the resource and the various "audiences" that benefit from this resource)
        Who should facilitate the resource: external experts, peers, co-learning experiences?
        Who is the recipient: practitioners, families and/or children?
        What adaptations should be considered?

Figure 5: Thinking about resources to work on ethics

3. Suggestions for replicating and expanding the model

The script we presented above develops over a half-day session but this initial plan could be expanded into a full day, broken down into different sessions, etc. In our initial formulation the workshop is divided into two parts. Again, it should be stressed that this first work-plan draws from our own initial thoughts and the script we developed for the session we have discussed above. Other researcher-practitioners interested in adapting the workshop should be able to 'tinker' -to draw from the terminology of the maker movement (Marsh et al., 2017b) - with the script and adjust it to their own goals, material and time constraints, and the setting in which it will develop. For example, in some settings workshop facilitators might have to prepare beforehand a variety of possible examples of "situations" in which ethical issues may arise to present and discuss with participants as materials to start the discussion - if, for example, the workshop includes participants with little practical experience (e.g. pre-service trainees) or settings in which little opportunities for critical reflection are available. In contrast, in other settings these examples and incidents may be quickly brought into the discussion by participants. Then facilitators' work may consist more in channelling the discussion towards some of the conceptual frames presented in the workshop.

The workshop plan can also be tailored to reflect specifically on the ethical issues 'in school' regarding young children's experiences with digital media and technologies, which may be of special interests to the readers of the journal. Organising a workshop on this topic, with teachers, educational researchers and other educational-related practitioners could serve to co-produce specific ethical guidelines that benefit both research and practices in relation to

school environment. The workshop or versions of it could also be developed in relevant spaces like nursery schools, primary schools, playcentres, orphanages, etc.

4. Conclusions

This paper presented the script and format of a workshop-type event to engage professionals and practitioners in the area of early childhood in relation to young children's engagement with digital technologies. The intersection between a particular age range, a focus on digital literacies/technologies and practitioner backgrounds reflects our own current research interests; yet we think the format can be adapted to work with other age groups and, perhaps, in relation to a broader view of digital media and digital technologies. It should be clear that we are not presenting this as a closed program, and thus do not think the proposal should be assessed within a program evaluation logic given the collaborative organization of the workshop format we put forward. Again, the workshop script is intended as a flexible tool that can be adapted to a variety of settings: schools, professional training events, research-collaborative spaces, etc. It can also be designed and adapted to target specific groups (e.g. the staff of a particular school, trainees within a similar professional qualification) or aim for a heterogenous group of participants.

The article briefly reports on the first experience implementing the workshop, which was set up as a research-collaboration event organized in a cultural center affiliated to the lead researcher's institution. Also, for this event we targeted a heterogenous group of practitioners/professionals with backgrounds in early childhood education, psychology, communication, social work or digital technology and who work in a variety of settings and professional roles: early childhood centers, NGOs, consultancy or educational support services. These circumstances influence what can be taken away from the feedback we received from the event - which we gathered through online communication after the event. Nevertheless, it might be worthwhile to close the article with the key points we extracted from this feedback: (1) Participants appreciated the format including the small size of the group, the timing of activities and the working methodology (script) we proposed, which guided the interaction towards a collaborative endeavor; (2) Participants appreciated participating in conversations where a diversity of experiences were presented in the heterogenous group; (3) Yet, this also made the event more demanding and one participant suggested that providing some preparatory activities or materials before engaging in the actual workshop could facilitate the process. Future iterations of this workshop may aim at working with another diverse group of practitioners or may be designed with a more focused audience in mind (e.g. early childhood care educators, as mentioned above). Also, future adaptations of the workshop may draw from the institutional support reported in this project or may be implemented in particular work/professional settings. In any case, this feedback is encouraging and valuable for the planning of future versions of the workshop.

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