# *Book reviews*

## THE CLASS: LIVING AND LEARNING IN THE DIGITAL AGE
*Livingstone, Sonia and Sefton-Green, Julian*
New York: New York University Press, 2016

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*The Class*, named by a 13-year old member after rejecting academic titles, looks from the unadorned cover, serious. And so it is, in its deep exploration of young people's ways of seeing the world. However, the authors suggest this book 'be read as a novel'. Despite their disclaimer that they are not creative writers, the style of *The Class* is immensely readable – inviting, informed, candid. The authors effortlessly weave the personal and local into larger sociocultural debates.

Livingstone and Sefton-Green engage in close analysis of a class of 13- to 14- year- olds at an ordinary urban secondary school in London, England, over the school year 2011-2012. They choose this cohort as being at a 'tricky age', with its identity preoccupations and love of digital media. Asking students what they want and how they see an increasingly individualised society, they contextualise young people's responses within the complexities of late modernity.

'Late modernity' is a time characterised by 'contrary forces of socio-technological innovation and the reproduction of traditional structures (the school, the family, social class) [which] threaten to pull young people in different directions' (p. 11). Meanwhile, schools hold fast to regimes of sorting and stratifying, measuring learning through individual measurement and competitiveness. This contrasts to the 'messiness' of young people's home lives and digital practices. Given these and other tensions, how do parents, children and teachers negotiate their lives together within the opportunities and constraints they face?

The authors tease out traditional concepts of 'social class', arguing the need for more nuanced understandings in contemporary contexts where economic and cultural resources are no longer so tightly linked, nor predictive of each other. While

social disadvantage is as embedded as ever, what has changed are the implications for social relations and identity. The amplification in this book is of students' voices themselves, voices that have been notably lacking in theoretical and policy debates to date.

Livingstone and Sefton-Green's conclusions from their detailed ethnographic investigations are both expected and surprising. Progressive educators, they argue, will be disappointed by parental support for regimented test approaches of schools, parents who are (understandably?) risk-averse in times of precarity. Students' home and community lives remain firmly separated. Young teenagers keep to a narrow radius from their home, meeting locally and, once home, stay home.

> As a result, the home—and especially the bedroom—has intense individual meanings for the young people that are ever less determined by parents, becoming increasingly a place in which friendship, gossip, and flirtation can occur, albeit online more than offline. (p.245)

We know from research that some young people are doing exciting, creative things online, using digital technology affordances to become, in Web 2.0 speak, 'produsers'. Many, however, remain consumers, underusing the potential of digital technologies to respond generatively to social change. Having provided a detailed empirical picture of student digital networks and connections/disconnections with broader social structures, the authors link their findings to larger issues of social and cultural capital. Livingstone and Sefton-Green leave us with the question of how educators can value and promote an expanded vision of what young people's places in the world could comprise; a vison unacknowledged by standardised tests. Parents and schools could work far more effectively to better understand young people's investments, both in their personal lives and 'civility', (inclusivity, transparency, and fairness). *The Class* provides a stimulating and articulate guide towards this understanding.