



WhatsApp: Is It Useful For Communication Learning?

Elena Aniela Mancaş¹

Abstract

Could we discuss literature on WhatsApp (WA)? Could you learn to write on WA? Could we turn something students are really fond of into a gate to meaningful learning? Obviously, yes, but it all depends on how the app is used. WA is free, easy to download, easy to use. Consequently it is perceived as something shallow, even harmful for the young mind. Many teachers believe that students are wasting their time on WA instead of learning. My research looks into how this app can become a powerful tool to enhance learning in groups of 5 graders and 8 graders from two different schools in Bucharest, Romania. The initiative for all the WA groups comes from the same teacher, but the involvement of the students varies according to the school ethos. Group A (5 graders) started their WA experience at the beginning of the school year 2015-2016 in order to improve written assignments and clarify various issues from the language class. The students enthusiastically embraced the new approach and they increasingly gained ownership of the learning experience, talking about spelling, text coherence and language rules. Sooner than later the discussions expanded to literature issues and reading recommendations. The teacher eclipsed more and more while students took control over their own learning. Group B (5 graders from another school) had trouble in coming together by means of the app. According to the school rules, the students are denied access to their phones while they are in class. As a result they developed a stereotype about the school as something dull and "serious" where ICT devices (and fun) are prohibited. This stereotype proved to be strong enough to distort WA communication with and within the group for learning purposes. Finally, the 8 graders used WA to improve their writing skills as a preparation for the national assessment that takes place at the end of the school year. WA proved to be beneficial to share project results and revised materials for the exam. The results show that a popular app can contribute to responsible communication and competence development whether in real or virtual environments.

1. Introduction: Observation and a brief survey

What do I know about my middle school students' authentic communication? As their mother tongue teacher and class supervisor I thought it is important to notice and to analyse the role of virtual communication in the life of my students. Consequently, during class, during recess, through outdoors activities I looked carefully on how they use android apps. Among the huge variety of apps the most popular with my middle schoolers seem to be WhatsApp and Instagram.

In order to have a better perspective on the teachers' and students' opinions and use of the respective apps I asked them a few questions:

- Do you frequently use the app? To what purpose?
- Is it useful for school activities or you just find it important in extraschool matters?
- Do you participate in any mixed groups where teachers and students interact?

After collecting the replies I got to the following conclusions:

- Teachers disagree with the use of apps (since they are a waste of time, that prevent children to thoroughly study).
- Students use the apps extensively but never for what they assume is / should be "school learning".

Thus, the research briefly presented in this paper starts from the following hypothesis: If the teacher takes on the role of partner/ guide within the digital communication as part of a WhatsApp group, the students positively use the app for school learning and for authentic communication.

2. Theoretical frame

My research makes use of a number of findings revealed by Veen and Vrakking in "Homo Zappiens" [5] and Howard Gardner in his book dedicated to the truth, the beauty and the goodness in the Twitter era [1].

Veen and Vrakking discuss positively and optimistically about the cognitive transformations that take place in the human mind when digital tools are used extensively. They consider that "Homo Zappiens"

¹ Institute for Educational Sciences, Romania



learns differently from "Homo Sapiens" and, as a result, teachers should reconsider their approach in an effort of adaptation and reconstruction.

2.1 How does the *zappiens* student learn?

1. From an early age, *H. Zappiens* is able to extract information from various sources and simultaneously process the various chunks of data collected. This behavior exhibits two competences. The first is crucial to learning and refers to inquiry questions. The second deals with identifying key words.
2. *Zappiens* rapidly approaches new content since s/he grew up making use of various ICT devices. Ever since early childhood *Zappiens* learned how to control streams of information. Everything important in her/his world is manipulated on a touch screen. Moreover, all those s/he wants to be in touch with are very near and can be contacted right way: thanks to social media, geographical distances are no longer a point in human interaction.
3. *Zappiens* is visually literate: s/he has the ability to read symbols, colours and icons that hold informational value and become useful instruments to identify and categorize information.
4. *Zappiens* develops cognitively by connecting with others and by taking part into communities of learning. *Zappiens* interacts with his/ her peers more effectively than previous generations.
5. *Zappiens* is more motivated when s/he cooperates with somebody else and genuinely takes part in a community of learning: s/he finds support in other participants' achievement and shares experiences to reach better understanding.
6. *Zappiens* prefers an individualized track of learning instead of the thorough linear study of the textbook.
7. *Zappiens* is familiar with virtual realities. Consequently s/he projects imagination from the inside out. His/her cognitive approach is centrifugal. The subject learns by testing various personal scenarios and intuitions in the real world.

Such behaviors are obvious in all children. They are most valuable for learning [4]. Instead of considering them toxic for academic learning, we can make the best of them and put them to work in order to facilitate the development of the competences stipulated in the curriculum.

2.2 The "virtues" in the digital world. Goodness reframed

Howard Gardner has quite recently revisited the classical values (truth, beauty, goodness) in order to reconsider their role in education nowadays, i.e. what he calls "the age of Twitter" [1]. In the chapter he dedicated to *Goodness*, Gardner starts from the Kantian idealism and suggests we should rethink our understanding of moral/ ethical values. He mentions Hammurabi's code and the Ten Commandments and comes to the conclusion that they are issued within a group, in order to preserve the specific group. These values define the "neighboring morality" which applies to an artificially determined group (that we know). But he argues that the most impressive human beings behave morally always, irrespective of appearance or the distance between frontiers or cultures. He continues the argument by making a distinction between the *neighboring morality* and the *ethics of roles*. The latter is a concept which is adequate to complex societies and which requires from abstract capacities, abstract attitudes, reflection and action beyond the immediate personal gain.

The above defined distinction brings about an essential issue for education nowadays mainly the intersection or the separating line between tolerance and moral relativism (live and let live). Tolerance is not the equivalent of compromise or the acceptance of convenient *truthiness*. [2]

With the emergence of the new media and the extensive use of apps, five ethical dimensions are at stake. They are part of the young people's lives and cannot be ignored: a sense of individual identity; a measure of privacy and confidentiality; intimacy and interaction within a community; copyright; credible sources (trust for online documentation).

In a more specific exploration, could literature bring about convergence between traditional and postmodernist perspectives of goodness? Could it help, in the space of words, to overcome the limits and limitations of *neighbouring morality* and open towards the *ethics of roles*? So, is it possible that the study of literature support young people to grow into responsible citizens? Is it acceptable to explore *truth as story telling* in our schools, according to a phrase suggested by a Romanian writer/ philosopher [3]?

"Let's say that while discourse is argumentative, a story is indicative. It does not discuss a theory, but it presents the state of the arts, it tells about a situation without explicit intentions of demonstrations. It does not offer answers but stimulates their search. In a nutshell, we could say the story tells by omission. It shows its audience the flickering among, beyond and above words. Since it "shows" instead of explaining, a story is pedagogically much more valuable than analytical descriptivism. It is



much easier to learn how to tie a tie or how to operate a device when somebody shows the necessary steps, in little to no words. Let us not forget that our education started with the stories told by our parents or grandparents and not with elaborate lectures.” [3]

3. WhatsApp: communication learning and ethical issues

The following sections will present how WhatsApp can enhance communication in a trendy yet authentic environment and support students with their school achievement. The research took place in the 2015-2016 school year.

3.1 Students and teacher in a class group

The change of approach consists in developing a better sense of belonging to a community of learners by integrating the students and the teacher in the WhatsApp group. Despite the initial anguished expectations, the presence of an adult with authority did not bring limitations to the group. On the contrary. The WhatsApp research highlighted:

- fast effective communication, since questions to clarify various issues have been asked with the popular App-like ease: in the hope that colleagues and/or teacher will see and answer;
- interaction and better understanding of one another: all the participants in the group find out about my interests and extracurricular activities;
- reflection on the writing process: rules are reminded in a natural way, without external interference or academic coercion.
- adoption of a polite attitude since the teacher promotes a benevolent, tolerant, open dialogue.

3.2 Examples of interaction

Fig.1 below depicts how clarifying questions can be asked and answered thanks to WhatsApp. The screenshots present the authentic conversation on the role of interrogation/ inquiry and the courage to ask for more input, clarification.

The teacher encourages a tolerant attitude and free expression. The last post in Fig. 1 illustrates the community of learners at its best since the teacher herself asks a question about how to save a screenshot on the phone. The question is clearly answered step by step by one of the students who is a digital native.



Fig. 1: Some of the first conversations on WhatsApp

Fig. 2 below illustrates an even more open attitude: the students ask, beyond the curriculum assignment, about books they would like to read and explain their preferences.

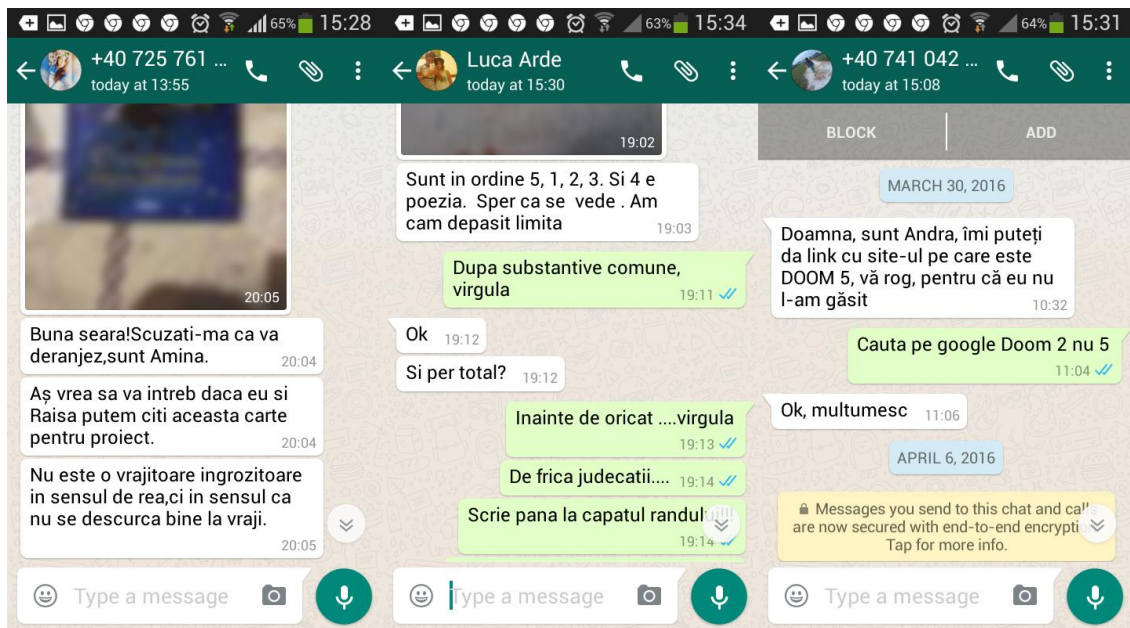


Fig.2 Suggestions for reading and writing

4. Conclusions

The WhatsApp study shows that digital apps can sustain achievement in meaningful contexts, supporting students to reflect on their assignments, on their conversational skills and their own learning interests. The personal example is very important for the positive effect of apps: students and teachers can become partners and learn together. But indeed, the teacher has to take some choices and create learning contexts that include apps that are popular among students. This means that quite often, the approach has to swerve towards a new – trendier – app! i.e. teaching has to update in consonance with the world/life upgrade.

References

- [1] Gardner, H. "Truth, Beauty and Goodness Reframed. Educating for the Virtues in the Age of Truthiness and Twitter", New York, Basic Books, 2011
- [2] Djuvara, N. "Is There any True History?" (in Romanian), Bucharest, Humanitas, 2011
- [3] Plesu, A. "Jesus's Parables. Truth as Storytelling" (in Romanian), Bucharest, Humanitas, 2012, pp. 93
- [4] Sarivan, L. "Homo Zappiens Challenges Language Education", 2011 http://conference.pixel-online.net/ICT4LL2011/common/download/Paper_pdf/ILT67-342-FP-Sarivan-ICT4LL2011.pdf
- [5] Veen, W. & Vrakking, B. "Homo Zappiens. Growing Up in the Digital Age, London, Network Continuum Education, 2006