

Upon the Role of the Teacher in the Informal Learning Setting of an Intercultural Computer Club

Anne Weibert, Birgit Sander, Kai Schubert, University of Siegen, Hölderlinstr. 3, 57068 Siegen, Germany
Email: Anne.Weibert@uni-siegen.de, Birgit.Sander@uni-siegen.de, Kai.Schubert@uni-siegen.de

Abstract: This poster aims to evaluate the significance of a teacher's doing in the informal learning setting of an after-school activity. We discuss and analyze this, using the example of intercultural computer clubs "come_IN" in Germany. Located in (primary) schools in socially and culturally diverse neighborhoods, these clubs decidedly aim at being everything else but school: offering the chance to get acquainted with modern technology and software.

Introduction

As an after-school activity, the intercultural computer clubs "come_IN" serve to establish and strengthen social relationships in the intercultural neighborhoods by enabling and supporting collaborative practices among the young and adult members of the neighborhoods' mainstream and migrant societal groups. "Come_IN" clubs are located in schools offering the chance to get acquainted with modern technology and software, yet not following a pre-set schedule in doing so. They are putting children and adults in equal positions as learners; having tutors and a teacher offering guidance instead of providing directions that are to be followed. Appropriation of computer technology in "come_IN" results from constant negotiation among its young and adult participants – tutors and teacher amidst them (Veith et al., 2008). We see: unlike the traditional classroom-situation, here the teacher does not stand out. Seeking out the significance of a teacher's doing in this informal learning setting is the aim of this poster. For the evaluation of the role of the teacher in this setting, we conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with teachers from the various clubs.

Related Work and Method of Research

Established in Germany as an advancement of the US computer clubhouses (see e.g. Kafai et al., 2009), referring to issues of intercultural and intergenerational learning, the "come_IN" computer club concept draws on different fields of research. The concept of "come_IN" draws on principles of constructionist thinking and situated learning (e.g. Chapman 2004). The research project is guided by principles of participatory action research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988).

Four teachers from the clubs in Bonn and Dortmund were interviewed in the study. All interviewees have club experience of one year. Questions for the interviews have been derived from the "come_IN" concept and the contribution it aims to achieve. Aiming at (a) socio-structural matters, asking for the motivation to participate, IT knowledge and experience, significance of the club in school, tasks and activities in the club, perception of the own role, and (b) aspects of culture, asking for cultural/migration backgrounds and their significance in the club, the community experience, projects that were perceived as either success or failure. Having completed all data collection, we transcribed and coded the interviews, informed by (Lofland & Lofland, 1995; Strauss & Corbin, 2004).

Teacher's Activities during Club Sessions

It lies within the nature of the "come_IN" concept to see all participants in a relatively equal position: decisions upon activities and project work are being conjointly made; children as well as adults can find themselves in the position of both learner and expert; the position of teachers and tutors does not stand out – they fulfill guiding and helping tasks when needed, and other than that subordinate to the respective project work.

The activities of the teacher in "come_IN" can also be seen in relation to the activities of children, adults and tutors: the teacher provides help for children and adults when needed and offers guidance for the development of new ideas. Tutors provide technical help for children, adults and teachers when needed. They also offer guidance for the development of new ideas when needed. Children play, explore, try out, draw and paint, write, take pictures or search the Internet. Their parents and other adults watch, accompany or help the children. They write, take pictures, learn image and film editing or search the Internet.

Discussion of Interview Results

The interviewee's responses point to the blurred line between learner and expert: in the club, teachers found themselves in a situation, where they would be (a) an expert, providing guidance in the development and realization of project ideas, and (b) learners themselves, with regard to the appropriation and use of modern media and computer technology. The teacher does not stand out in intercultural computer clubs "come_IN" – yet, his role is central to a successful implementation and development of this informal learning setting. In the

analysis of the teacher's interviews, six aspects can be identified as central to the role of the teacher in this context.

(1) The teacher as a go-between: Decidedly aiming at being something other than school, the school still influences the structure and atmosphere of intercultural computer clubs "come_IN". Being "at home in both worlds", the teacher often finds him- or herself in the role of a go-between: in casual, rather informal talk with parent participants in the club, enabling peaks of children's general performance in school; in his activities in the computer club being present to the children as something other than the traditional teacher in class. The club being a voluntary after-school activity, teachers would concentrate on the voluntariness as a chance to reach out to the parents on the one hand, and to offer the chance to delve into a topic to the children – a chance that regular lessons frequently do not bring about.

(2) The teacher as a learner: It lays within the "come_IN" concept to blurry the lines dividing experts and learners. In the interviews, teachers recognized the project-related approach to modern media and computer technology as a chance, especially for the children to gain in technological fluency.

(3) The teacher as an attachment figure: One might think that a teacher would not be too central in this kind of setting. A good deal of the club's social structure does depend on the teacher as attachment figure – as someone, who is good company.

(4) The teacher as company: The evaluation of the interviews points to the teacher as a main instance of support for the children in an intercultural computer club "come_IN." Especially to younger children, a familiar teacher and his backing is a needed point of reference. This role is even more comfortable for the teacher: In the computer club, he finds himself in a position, where he can be good company and likewise concentrate on social matters and the development of knowledge and skills.

(5) The teacher as a motivating figure: With intergenerational learning being a central aspect of project work in "come_IN", teachers in the club often find themselves in the position of a mediator between children and parents – a motivating figure for both, children and parent participants in the club. Being closely connected to the children's experience realm in the school's context, teachers in the clubs are in a position where they can introduce parents to a part of their children's world they formerly were not all too familiar with. The teacher as a role model encourages parents to actively engage in the club's project work. He is a motivator for the parents to regularly come and join their kids in the clubs.

(6) The teacher as an expert (transferring knowledge): All interviews show: Rather goal orientated, teachers focus on a project's outcome. What do children learn? What's the concrete result of club project? With this, teachers closely relate to the classical understanding of their role as an expert, transferring knowledge to the learning ones.

Conclusion

We see: the role of the teacher is central to a successful implementation and development of an after-school activity like intercultural computer clubs "come_IN". We see the teacher in this context in a role that goes beyond his traditional position in the school context. Not only do teachers find themselves in the position of being a "key to people", serving as a mediator between children and adult interests. They also mediate among in- and outside-of-school contexts. Teachers themselves described flexibility to be the central prerequisite to meet these characteristics. It is a kind of flexibility, where the lines dividing learners and experts are blurred. Learning in this context is decidedly local, relating to projects from the participants "world" – and the teacher being actively engaged in their realization. Voluntary after-school activity like "come_IN" has to be wanted to make it work.

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