FACEBOOK AND WHATSAPP AT SCHOOL, PRESENT SITUATION AND PROSPECTS IN ITALY

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ABSTRACT

In the last few years, social media have become one of the main communication vehicles among young generations. Gradually, they are also entering the school. Starting from data collected through a questionnaire administered to approximately 2000 secondary school students and those gathered from a questionnaire and interviews with about 300 teachers of schools of the same order, we try to take stock of the spread of social networks such as Facebook and WhatsApp as a means of communication between teachers and students for educational purposes, with a main focus on the reasons for the choice for or against using social networks at school.

KEYWORDS

Social networks, secondary school, Facebook, WhatsApp, friendship between teachers and students.

1. INTRODUCTION

The widespread dissemination of electronic communication services and the great success met by social networks have led researchers to wonder about their potential in formal learning environments.

With a series of investigations into the world of adolescents' communication (Lazzari & Jacono Quarantino, 2010, 2013, 2015) we followed the evolution of Facebook and WhatsApp outside and inside Italian schools, and with ongoing research, we are trying to figure out whether, how and why secondary school teachers are ready to accept them as tools to support learning processes.

As for the students, about 8000 high school students were given a questionnaire over the course of three surveys, the latest of which, in the spring of 2015, involved about 2000 students of secondary schools in the city of Bergamo and its province. With regard to the teachers, we have begun to administer a questionnaire, which has already reached over 200 teachers of secondary schools, for now in the Bergamo province, in northern Italy, in future in the rest of Lombardy. We also carried out interviews with approximately 50 teachers and school principals.

2. STATE OF THE ART

Martin (2009), in one of the first studies on the impact of social networks on student achievement, showed that there was no correlation between the time spent online in social services and the grades of a sample of more than 1000 students at a North American university. Later, Roblyer et al (2010) found that students are more keen than teachers on using social networks in educational settings, and that the latter believe that Facebook is more suitable for personal and social use rather than for educational purposes. In a more recent

study, Lim and Richardson (2016) reveal that the intensity of using social networks has a significant correlation with students' perceptions of using social networks for educational purposes, and that the advances in social networking capabilities increase the possibility for educational social networks to act as a means to overcome issues such as students' isolation or lack of community. And Lambić (2016) shows that while the generic use of Facebook does not affect academic performance, its use for educational purposes influences it.

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To date, the number of reflections on the interaction of students and teachers on social networking sites is growing, often confined to the dilemmatic question of whether teachers should accept students' friendship requests within Web 2.0. With our research, we are trying to get a picture of the existing situation in Italy, to see if and how Facebook and WhatsApp can become support tools in teaching and learning processes in our secondary schools.

3. EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE AND DISCUSSION

The overwhelming success of WhatsApp is the largest evidence certified by our survey of 2015 on media consumption of adolescents; among them, the multimedia communication app has even become the first tool of communication with families, replacing the traditional phone call.

By examining in a diachronic perspective the data collected through our three student surveys, we may follow the trend of Facebook spread, from autumn 2008, in a first pilot administration, when still only 30% of secondary school students claimed to have used it a few times, through spring 2009, when percentage rose to 66%, to spring 2012, when it arrived at 90%; eventually, in the spring of 2015 it stood at 81.4%. The decline is not so clear, although the percentage of daily users decreased (from 65% in 2012 to the current 49.3) in favor of other services such as WhatsApp and Instagram. In summary, the data point out that Facebook is intended as an elective tool for information, WhatsApp for direct communication, Instagram for the dissemination of images.

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To examine the problem we have set a new research agenda, based on a questionnaire administered to secondary school teachers (N = 215 up to now) and on interviews with teachers (41) and school administrators (10). The survey is not easy to complete, because of difficulties in building the sample. For the interviews, initially we contacted teachers directly known by the research team, then we applied a snowball strategy; for the online questionnaire, contacts are reached through the trade union organizations, which forward our web address to their mailing lists; their mediation guarantees a rather uniformly distributed sample. In any case, the survey is slowly advancing, with a main focus on the reasons for the choice for or against the use of social networks in class, looking for any correlations with:

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Regarding the fear of privacy invasions, it is interesting to note, however, that only 2 out of 41 interviewees report that they publish personal contents, and in any case both of them have students among their friends. The lack of appropriate specific digital skills is rejected as a significant reason not to use Facebook at school.

4. FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

The research presented here for the first sharing with the scientific community, in order to stimulate reflection and gather valuable information, continues with the administration of the questionnaire to teachers and the coding and interpretation of the interviews, which have so far generated about seventy pages of typewritten text.

As soon as the statistical sample is more consistent, a statistical model will be applied to spot the correlations among data. Our main hypotheses aim at verifying whether the resistance of teachers to using Facebook at school is influenced by low levels of digital competencies and a feeling of personal or collective self-efficacy, as well as their age, number of years teaching, or educational background.

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