

Re-assembling the Digital World, or the Public Sociology of Digital Education Platforms

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Abstract

In the contemporary educational landscape, digital technologies have become an obligatory passage point, often appearing neutral, to the extent that they are rarely put under scrutiny and discussion. However, these are necessary steps in order to eventually reimagining them to attune to specific educational discursive frames. This article moves from the assumption that there is a need for educational researchers, educators and other relevant educational subjects to coalesce in a collective mobilisation that brings at the centre of public and policy debate the politics of digital education technology through a work of collective problematisation and reinvention. In order to contribute to this urgency, this article thus presents the theoretical and methodological underpinnings, and the results, of an experiment in what we call a public sociology of educational technology. Drawing on Michael Burawoy's plea for a Public Sociology (2004), our aim was to design and play with a methodology apt to carry out a work of creative and affirmative critique. The experiment was carried out by the L@bed Collective during the second edition of the Reclaim the Tech (RTT) Festival, held in Bologna in May 2024. During the workshop we invited our public to engage in a conversation about the design of the UNICA platform and its performative effects. We did this through a combination of two methods, walkthrough and a/r/tography, aimed respectively to playfully dis- and re-assemble materially the UNICA platform. We present some preliminary considerations on the insights which we gathered from such an experiment in public sociology of educational technology, with a specific reference to both the potential and limits of our methodology and the insights of such a collective work of denaturalisation, problematisation and reinvention.

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Introduction

Digital technologies are increasingly becoming everyday features in our educational landscapes. While digital transformation/innovation continues to be on top of any global or local policy agenda which intends to modernise education and deal with its supposed crisis, at the same time – and paradoxically –, platforms, apps, digital contents and their infrastructures are increasingly taken for granted as part of the machinery of our educational life. Vibrant controversies may be observed in the public and policy discourse on the digital transformation in education which are typically animated by polarised integrated or apocalyptic positionalities that are often detached from the grey realities of educational practices. However, in our daily and “private” educational lives, we “naturally” assemble ourselves with a multifarious and heterogeneous ensemble of digital technologies. This is mostly due to the fact that the digital – as code and space, material infrastructure and epistemic terrain, as a timescape and an ethics – has become an obligatory passage point for many students, teachers, educators, parents, and administrators. This holds both for those who have to follow the flows of their daily educational lives, and for those who are called to govern them, eventually dealing with the multiple crises of education. As an outcome, in our reading, this leads to the “hollowing out” of any public space where the politics and materiality of educational digital technology can be put under scrutiny, discussed, and eventually re-invented, re-locating it within a wider discursive frame that deals with our conceptions about what education is and what it means to educate.

Given this scenario and its apparent paradoxes, this article moves from the assumption that there is a need for educational researchers, educators and other relevant educational subjects to coalesce in a joint mobilisation that brings at the centre of public and policy debate the politics of digital education technology through a work of collective problematisation and re-invention. There is the need to create concrete utopias¹ (Lefebvre, 1974), that

¹ We use Lefebvre’s notion of concrete utopias here to refer to an attitude, a utopian disposition which moves from knowing and criticizing the real, explores its possibilities, and relies on such a work to imagine proposals for another “world”. Such a form of utopianism

is, spaces where to mobilise knowledges and methodologies which can make such a work of problematisation and re-invention possible.

This is especially urgent at a time when key educational processes such as curriculum development, classroom communication, assessment and evaluation, guidance and school management are increasingly re-intermediated through digital platforms and apps (Decuypere et al., 2021). In order to contribute to this struggle, this article intends to present the theoretical and methodological underpinnings, and the results, of an experiment in what we call a *public sociology of educational technology*, carried out by the L@bed Collective² during the second edition of the *Reclaim the Tech* (RTT) Festival³, held in Bologna in May 2024.

In designing such an experimental experience, the L@bed Collective was influenced by Michael Burawoy's plea for a *Public Sociology* (2004), a sociology whose challenge is to engage multiple publics in ways that enact a knowledge back-translation and create the conditions for making public issues out of private troubles, in response to the privatisation of everything. Public sociology represents a sociological endeavour which creates new visible, thick, active, local publics, or often counter-publics, inviting them into horizontal conversations whose aim is to establish the terrain for processes of mutual education (Burawoy, 2004, p. 8). Consistently, our aim was to design a methodology (and "play" with it) that allows for carrying out a work of affirmative critique, hence reconnecting to the debate of post-critical pedagogy (Hodgson, Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2018; Gorur et al., 2024). When dealing with digital technologies, this would mean to increase the attention paid to how education intersects with concepts such as platformisation, automation and datafication (Selwyn, 2024), making an effort to open spaces for the re-invention of the relationship between education and technology. Such a methodology consists of a joyful yet sociologically-informed analytical machinery whose aim is to allow heterogeneous social actors (an educational public) to come together, free itself from the strictures of technological determinism and solutionism (Grimaldi, Landri & Taglietti, 2020), and engage with such a politically and

does not deny social, spatial or historical realities but takes them into consideration – deal with them – in order to explore its possibilities.

² The multidisciplinary Research Laboratory on Education and Digitalisation founded by the Institute for Research on Population and Social Policies of the National Research Council of Italy (CNR-IRPPS) and the Department of Social Sciences of the University of Naples "Federico II".

³ *Reclaim The Tech* is a community on the move, fighting for digital justice. In a world marked by conflicts and transformations, the RTT community seeks a space for hybridisation and reappropriation of technologies, open to alliances with the demands for social, gender and climate justice (<https://reclaimthetech.it>).

analytically driven work of denaturalisation, problematisation and re-invention through a “playful” activity.

In this article we will first present the theoretical and methodological traits of such a methodology, which combined the *walkthrough method*, developed by Light and colleagues (2018), as a way of critically engaging with platform/app critical analysis, with the technique of a/r/tography (Leavy, 2020), a creative form of practice-based research which bridges the arts and education to create opportunities to consider other ways of knowing the world. After, we will offer an in-vivo account of our experiment in *public sociology of educational technology* during the RTT Festival in Bologna, where we mobilised our methodology in a public workshop titled *School and critical approaches to digital platforms*, whose aim was to collectively problematise the pervasive effects of digital platforms on the current forms of schooling, and reimagine together alternative approaches to the digitalisation of school education. In designing the workshop, we decided to put the question ‘*What technologies for education guidance?*’ at the forefront, also given the recent launch of the UNICA platform (<https://unica.istruzione.gov.it/it>) by the Italian Ministry of Education and Merit (MIM). UNICA is a digital platform designed and published by the MIM «to accompany girls and boys on their growth path, to help them make informed choices and to cultivate and bring out their talents»⁴. All Italian schools, teachers, students and families are required to use the platform and deal with it. The aim of the platform is to digitally centralise and support students’ guidance process and school choice. As such, the platform provides several resources for students’ parents and teachers who are specialised in educational guidance and/or act as tutors for guidance within their schools. For each one of these different possible audiences, private areas, accessible only by logging in with SPID⁵ or CIE⁶, have been arranged within the platform, making users follow different navigational paths, based on their acknowledged role. Consistently, during the workshop we invited our public to engage in a conversation about the design of this specific platform, its performative effects but mainly to start from its dis-assemblage to reimagine or re-invent a digital technology for educational guidance.

In the last section of this article, we present some preliminary considerations on the insights which we gathered from such an experiment in *public sociology of educational technology*, with a specific reference to

⁴ <https://unica.istruzione.gov.it/it>.

⁵ That is, “Servizio Pubblico Identità Digitale”, the official Italian Public Digital Identity System.

⁶ That is, “Carta d’Identità Elettronica”, the official Italian Electronic ID, that can also be used online as a digital ID.

both the potential and limits of our methodology and the results of such a collective work of denaturalisation, problematisation and re-invention. We will argue that our experiment clearly shows how:

- a work of collective reflexivity on our relationships with educational digital technologies cannot prescind from a focus on the epistemic and governmental inscriptions of digital technologies, which means analysing technologies in their socio-materiality and their capacity to contribute to the re-configuration of the spatial, temporal and ethical axes of educational lives;
- this work has to be carried on through a methodology that moves away from the (dystopic) risks of technological determinism and recognises the relational character of any process of technological use;
- such a methodology has to be public, in a sense that it has to be designed in order to value the different knowledges, perspectives, capacities and creativities which constitute the richness of any educational collective where teachers, educators, students and researchers engage themselves in the creation of digitally-mediated educational concrete utopias.

Experimenting with affirmative critique: walkthrough and a/r/tography methods for public sociology

In this paragraph, we will describe and delve into the techniques that have been used for our “experiment” of public sociology dealing with the governmental educational platform UNICA. As we will see, the methodology exposed here constitutes an “unconventional” way of coupling dis-assembling (critical) techniques with re-assembling (affirmative) techniques in a participatory way, with the aim of opening up new paths to non-merely-academic research and forms of public sociology. In other words, the techniques presented here have been adjusted to the aim of developing a participative and collective process of denaturalisation, problematisation and re-invention of a specific digital educational tool through a “playful” activity.

In fact, if on the one hand the aim of the workshop was to collectively “dis-assemble” the educational platform and its materiality to gain a better insight of its scope and features, on the other hand, a second phase of the workshop has been dedicated to a “creative” process of collective reimagination, aimed at re-assembling and creatively redesigning the platform. As such, the methodology has been composed of a “dis-assembling” technique to address the materiality of the platform, namely the “walkthrough” method (Light et al., 2018), and of an imaginative/creative technique, i.e., “a/r/tography” (Springgay et al., 2005). We will now first

briefly describe these two techniques separately, and then delve deeper into how they have been coupled and applied to the case described here.

The walkthrough method

The walkthrough method, developed by Light and colleagues (2018), is a way of critically engaging with an app's Graphical User Interface (GUI)⁷, basing on the consideration that GUIs are, in fact, cultural artefacts incorporating relations, visions, practices, and governance patterns, thus suggesting that interfaces can be critically described and qualitatively analysed. Inspired by Cultural Studies and Science & Technology Studies, the walkthrough method aims to reconstruct an interface's context of deployment and 'environment of expected use' by examining «its technological mechanisms and embedded cultural references to understand how it guides users and shapes their experiences» (*Ibid.*, p. 882). As the authors explain:

The core of this method involves the step-by-step observation and documentation of an app's screens, features and flows of activity – slowing down the mundane actions and interactions that form part of normal app use in order to make them salient and therefore available for critical analysis. The researcher registers and logs into the app, mimics everyday use where possible and dis-continues or logs out while attending to technical aspects, such as the placement or number of icons, as well as symbolic elements, like pictures and text. This process is contextualised within a review of the app's vision, operating model and governance (p. 882).

Hence, the walkthrough method entails a close interaction with an interface in order to collect qualitative data (field notes, screenshots, etc.) that shed light on the material (e.g., technical) and immaterial (e.g. cultural) elements composing it. This inquiry-oriented interaction can be performed individually or collectively. Further, the method also involves an analysis of the interface's broader context of deployment (e.g., to gain insights about the organisation deploying the interface – in our case, the MIM). Even though this method of inquiry was specifically conceived to analyse apps, it may also be used to examine other kinds of GUIs, for instance digital platform GUIs. GUIs make the backend of the platform visible and support/enable – e.g., by sequencing or illustrating – the performance of activities and interactions (Decuypere et al., 2021). In this sense, GUIs are the most

⁷ GUIs are what the user see on their screen when using and navigating a platform/app, i.e. a set of text and visual elements (buttons, images, etc.).

“visible” part of a platform and, at the same time, an artefact through which a certain order of things can be described and organised.

GUIs intermediate the relations between the different actors involved, defining and regulating the forms of exchange and interaction possible between them. In this sense, GUIs enable certain activities while simultaneously defining their codes of conduct. In other words, they configure – define, enable and constrain – users (Woolgar, 1990) and their likely (inter)actions, defining the “roles” and “script” they will have to adhere to (Akrich, 1992). In fact, although neutral in appearance, GUIs intervene in user relations, making certain practices, interactions and activities feasible, but also proposing and making certain conceptions and specific imaginaries relating, e.g., to learning and education, (in)visible. In this sense, GUIs (and the apps and platforms they participate in) do not merely facilitate and intermediate the sharing of content or the performance of activities but constitute new forms of organisation (Decuyper et al., 2021). The tools, values and ideas inscribed in the architecture and design of GUIs make it possible to propose and define certain practices by making them divisible, intelligible, knowable and implementable (to the detriment of others). Considering these aspects when talking about the deployment of platforms or apps, allows us to highlight the different dynamics, choices, materialities and actors involved, as well as their contingency and situatedness. Designers’ visions and assumptions play a crucial role in this entanglement, as they imagine and define different user groups and their relations with the platform (and among themselves). In other words, the ontological power of educational platforms configure (enable, constrain and define) their users (Gorur & Dey, 2021). While such a role is not always detectable in a deterministic way, its traces can be found by looking at how the interface mechanisms and features may encourage or discourage certain interactions between users and platform, or by asking how the interface supports certain discourses and/or conceptions of educational practices.

The walkthrough method is a way of engaging directly with an interface to explore its technological mechanism and cultural and ethical visions. As such, this method offers means to dis-assemble and problematise GUIs’ taken-for-grantedness. Given that GUIs are nowadays a constitutive dimension of many social realms (e.g., the entanglement of educational platforms and the way educational practices are conceived, acted and experienced), analysing GUIs in a collective way may become a form through which public sociology can be performed.

Arts-Based Research and the a/r/tography technique

With Arts-Based Research (ABR) we refer to a set of methodological

tools used by researchers across various disciplines and stages of social research, including data generation, analysis, interpretation and presentation of results (Leavy, 2020). ABR moves from the idea that creative arts can be adapted in order to address social research's concerns and questions in ways that are holistic and that intertwine theory and practice.

ABR, thus, challenges methodological and epistemological conventions, as well as pre-constituted assumptions about what research is and should be: for this reason, it implies a reflexive work aimed towards the renegotiation of disciplinary boundaries and standards, taking part in the debate concerning the presumptuous claim of objective knowledge production in social sciences.

As Eisner (1997) put it, as social scientists we have grown accustomed with the idea that our knowledge should be solid and our data hard, as they were a secure place on which to stand. Conversely, knowledge as a process, as a temporary state, is uncomfortable to many. Hence, with ABR, one of the key intents is to emphasise the need to see and create research in different shapes (Leavy, 2020), recoding social research as a creative craft. While Arts-Based Research is a broad field, the various methods it comprises share some common tenets, such as participation, openness and publicness.

In the educational field, ABR has a far-reaching history and a rich tradition (Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2018) which moves from the early theoretical premises about the pedagogical potential of art (Dewey, 2008; Biesta, 2017), and argue for its relevance towards multi-modal meaning making and communication (Thomson, 2024), collaboration and self-awareness (Hickey-Moody, 2013; Thomson, 2024), and even to engage in students' (and teachers') reflection concerning the world and their place in it (Wright et al., 2021).

A specific strand of Arts-Based Research which engages with educational practices and settings is *a/r/tography* (Leavy, 2020; Irwin, 2013). *A/r/tography* is a research methodology, a creative practice and a performative pedagogy: in other words, it is practice-based research which bridges the arts and the education, leveraging the former to retrieve education as a moment of encounter, a shifting of consciousness, an opportunity to consider other ways of knowing our world (Irwin, 2013). The original graphic rendering of the word, thus, is precisely to weigh the entanglement of the different roles – artist/researcher/teacher – which is indeed a displacement of such roles.

A/r/tography combines the activities of art-making, researching and teaching, resulting in a living inquiry which takes advantage of the space in-between process and product, art and audiences, teachers and students, engaging continually in a process of not-knowing, of looking for meaning

that is difficult in tension (Irwin, 2013). Thus, a/r/tography is particularly suited to researches whose aim is to grasp and interpret the latent dimensions of educational situations, triggering them through artistic action, understood in a non-instrumental sense, and through the non-subsidiary involvement of the actors. It avoids absolutist claims and remains open to the uncontrollable nature of what happens in any classroom – in Biesta’s words, to the “weakness” of education (Biesta, 2015).

“Walkthrough a/r/tography” as an act of public sociology

The walkthrough and the a/r/tography methods share a common point: they both begin by challenging something that is taken for granted. While the walkthrough approach questions the “neutrality” and objectivity of platforms, a/r/tography confronts itself with the traditional epistemological assumptions about research and knowledge production. Moreover, both techniques offer the opportunity to engage collectively with an object or issue of research, allowing for participatory and “open” research processes.

In this sense, to address one of the many digital platforms that populate contemporary educational spaces in a post-critical way (i.e., through affirmative forms of critique), we moved from the idea that by coupling these methods it would have been possible to create a workshop composed of one “dis-assembling” moment (the collective walkthrough) and of one “re-assembling” moment (the a/r/tography). As such, we imagined the coupling of these techniques as a way to: 1) confront oneself collectively with the materiality of the UNICA platform, i.e., its features and functions; 2) activate a creative collective process of reimagination of these features and functions.

Thus, the aim of this attempt at “creative public sociology” was to open up a space to critically engage with the UNICA platform and to reflect about how it guides users, shaping their educational experiences and practices. In other words, the idea was to collectively dis-assemble the vision incorporated in the UNICA platform and to understand its environment of expected use. In our case, the UNICA platform configures three types of users: students, teachers, and parents.

Therefore, to (re)take awareness of the platform, as non-neutral, and likewise to dis-assemble it for a public act of technological re-appropriation, three focuses, i.e. three research questions, were proposed to the workshop participants:

- What is the ideal student/teachers/parents proposed by UNICA?
- Through which expected practices is this idea proposed?
- Through what types of tools, languages, interface features are this vision and this idea of student defined by the platform?

Once these dimensions of inquiry have been dis-assembled using the walkthrough method, through a/r/tography we focused on their reconstruction, in order to highlight the complementarity between the act of exposing and that of opposing (Biesta, 2015). To this aim, we chose to tap into Arts-Based Research methodologies as a repertoire to complete the critical work we took on through the walkthrough with an affirmative one which is, as a matter of fact, an inherent, albeit often overlooked, facet of critique.

After the “dis-assembling” moment, we relied on the method of a/r/tography to open a space for collective and participatory reimagination of the UNICA platform. In particular, based on the previous recognition of ideal types (educational subjects) conceived by UNICA, the use of a/r/tography aimed to re-assemble the interface’s languages, tools and features, as well the personas of students/parents/teachers it proposes. As we will see through the next paragraphs, in practice, this happened by artistically imagining and generating a new platform interface by using the “collage” method. In this process, we were influenced by Eco’s (1971) notion of “Opera Aperta”: an object, produced by one or more authors, capable of organising a fabric of communicative effects that can be received and further expanded by the public. In this sense, the artworks are conceived to manifest a richness of facets and resonances without ever ceasing to be itself.

In order to familiarise the participants with the methodologies used, we packaged and presented them as the rules of a game. Hence, we have translated the four dimensions of the walkthrough (composition of the user interface, tone of voice and textual context, symbolic representation, and functions, tools and features) into a game board. In addition to that we have arranged a set of “unexpected event” cards to reduce the risk of flattening the participants’ considerations into a predetermined assortment of fixed dimensions. The same playful attitude was then used for the collage making exercise, during which the participants had the chance to craft their own game boards.

Far from being an institutionalised method, the combined and playful use of these techniques has been deployed as an “experiment” to investigate new ways of coupling affirmative critique with forms of public sociology. Through the next paragraph, we will see how this “experiment” unfolded in practice. In this, we will try to expose the practical implications of the workshop’s organisation and implementation, as well as discuss its strengths and weaknesses.

Re-inventing educational guidance: the walkthrough a/r/tography of the Platform UNICA

As anticipated in the introduction, during the second edition of the *Reclaim the Tech* (RTT) Festival, held in Bologna in May 2024, L@B-ED organised a workshop titled *School and critical approaches to digital platforms*. The context of the RTT Festival was very favourable for this experimental exercise in public sociology: born out of a bottom-up process fuelled by a community of activists, the festival brings together many marginalised knowledges about digital means and the digitalisation of society. RTT thus seemed to offer the perfect stage to ignite a common reflexive process about technologies, their social and educational impact, the influence of tech companies in shaping our institutional arrangements in education, and the complex ethical questions these issues raise regarding educational inequalities and data privacy. Furthermore, the ethical global approach of this festival resonated strongly with L@B-ED's theoretical orientation towards affirmative critique. Rather than rejecting digital tools outright, the festival advocates for their more thoughtful and intentional use to build a more inclusive and equitable society, reclaiming digitalisation as a tool to promote social, ecological, and gender justice.

The 'School and critical approaches to digital platforms' workshop was thus planned to gather school stakeholders (such as school managers, teachers, union representatives, and even students), educational digital experts (such as designers, DPOs, and innovators), as well as members of the broader public. The objective was to perform an exercise of affirmative critique, in order to collectively problematize the pervasive and often subtle effects of digital platform on the current forms of schooling; and to reimagine together alternative approaches to the digitalization of school education. More specifically, we wanted to test our methodology combining walkthrough and a/r/tography towards a twofold aim: to dis-assemble the UNICA platform, and to re-assemble it by attuning it to different educational sensitivities and alternative ideas about learning and learning personas.

Once the 12 participants were present – and after a brief outline of the workshop, including its aims and methodology (framed as the rules of the game) – a very concise presentation of the UNICA platform was delivered.

After the platform presentation, the roleplay started. The first passage was that of the walkthrough. The workshop participants (from now on: players) were required to familiarise themselves with the UNICA platform for an adequate amount of time by navigating it on their mobile devices. They were then invited to choose a role for the next phase: 'Do you want to be a teacher, a parent or a student?'. The key recommendation was to select a role that was

different from their real-life position; for instance, parents were encouraged to play as either teachers or students. Based on this role choice, the players were grouped into three different teams (each sitting around a separate worktable) and furnished with game materials, including a game board, a set of “unexpected event” cards (as is often the case with role-playing games), and some instructions to help them during the navigation. Players were also provided with various materials and resources specifically related to the platform, including a list of links to video tutorials and screenshots of the e-portfolio, which represents the key tool of UNICA and is accessible by logging in only to teachers, students, parents and technical-administrative school staff.

Each team was first tasked with surfing the UNICA platform from the point of view of the role they assumed (teacher, parent, or student), marking down some crucial aspects of their navigational experience. The dimensions along which their experience have been dis-assembled were drawn from the walkthrough (Light et al., 2018) methodological frame: Composition of the user interface, Tone of voice and textual context, Symbolic representation, and Functions, tools and features. These dimensions served as prompts for collective discussion and “data gathering”, encouraging each team to synthesise and re-elaborate their experience on the platform, thus articulating and guiding the fabrication of a shared characterisation of the user that the UNICA platform aims to produce. In this way, we tried to facilitate the analytical and reflexive processes working as a group of six mediators, two per team. We walked together with the players, soliciting their analysis and their thoughts, answering their questions, and clarifying the “rules of the game” with the discretion needed by our merely supportive function. Each team was then invited to share and discuss collectively the remarks that emerged from their respective walkthroughs.

In the next phase, based on the a/r/tography methodology (Leavy, 2020), the teams were invited to engage in the reimagination of possible alternative visions of educational guidance through the collage technique. They were provided with white poster boards, a set of stationery items, magazine and newspaper clippings, and screenshots of UNICA. Starting from the ideal users assumed by the platform, the players – now turned into “artists” – were asked to use the collage medium to *re-construct* the tools, tone and features of the platform interface, with the aim of reimagining the three categories of users – students, parents, teachers – that the platform is designed to address. The use of collage as a method allowed the participants to move beyond critique and actively engage in the creation of new possibilities. They were asked to present their final “masterpieces”, a term that we used deliberately and with a touch of irony, echoing the language used by UNICA, where it is

deployed to refer to students' projects uploaded to the platform as most representative of their progress and skills. A/r/tography practice thus facilitated a critical re-appropriation of digital technology, allowing an interesting role-reversal: by inviting participants to imagine new interfaces of the platform (i.e., a new homepage or e-portfolio), they had to abandon their user-role, turning into designers of their UNICA platform. Real needs, expectations, and frustrations with the current platform emerged to the surface. In this regard, it is worth pointing out that the creative phase was developed by the three teams autonomously, without any involvement or mediation by researchers.

At the end of the collage-making process, the groups' various masterpieces were exhibited hanging on a wall of the TPO (the festival location) main hall, where they were left for the rest of the festival as a set of *opere aperte* (Eco, 1971) along with some pencils, markers, scissors and other equipment apt to modify them, as to leave the debate open to other suggestions. While this aspiration emerged from a specific epistemological position and was realized only to a certain extent – something we will further explore in future experiments – the walkthrough, collective discussion, and collage-making each generated some intriguing insights respectively yielded some interesting insights.

The data collected through the analysis of the observations made by the three groups during the walkthrough phase and the collective discussion revealed widespread criticism towards the platform under investigation. Specifically, the team who decided to play the parent's role remarked that UNICA requires a high level of digital literacy by parents, as well as a full knowledge of Italian and English, the only two languages in which the platform's contents are currently available. The platform proposes a hyper-performative model of education, inducing parents to constantly monitor and evaluate their child's progress, thus somehow delegitimizing the role of the teacher, and inciting comparison and competition among students. Moreover, the team complained about the compartmentalisation of competencies as suggested by the platform, as well as about the lack of attention for students with disabilities. Despite the apparently reassuring, simplifying and empowering tone, UNICA seems to not be easily accessible and inclusive from different points of view. Indeed, the new platform proposed by this team through the a/r/tography reclaims a more inclusive school, aimed at enhancing the talents and expectations of all students, promoting multifaceted and hybrid growth, where the experiences and competencies of the students valorised are not limited to school. Parents are seen as people who have to be supported in the use of the platform but also

as a support for the student within the educational community – implying a kind of co-responsibility pact.

The team that assumed the students' role strongly criticised the vision of guidance underlying the platform, considered schematic, computational and dehumanising. Students do not seem to be at the centre of the growth path whereas the importance of certificates is significantly emphasised. In this perspective, UNICA was found to be more work-oriented than school-oriented: the student is seen as a “producer of certificates” or a worker who must strive for excellence. The group stressed also that the platform operates with an extractivist logic: students are required to provide a lot of information and data but in return, they only receive mere guidance on how to improve the skills they have already acquired. Also, this team confirmed that the language used by the platform is very technical. The poster realised by this team, in fact, advocates for a more humanised platform and education, inviting in large letters to cheer for young people, linking sarcastically growth perspectives with outputs and guidance for students with entrepreneurship.

The team which took on the teacher's role shared the view that the platform appears primarily designed to steer students toward the labour market. Since the student's growth path is bound to predetermined categories, the function of the teacher is reduced to monitoring and evaluation, like a kind of “enforcer” or mere executor within an already defined system. The team also pointed out inconsistencies between the platform's visual and textual elements, noting that images sometimes contradicted the accompanying text, while the interface itself felt indirect and confusing. As far as the tone is concerned, it was defined as polite and assertive with requests formulated as instructions. A strong criticism towards the Government also emerged, where the group observed that the platform was developed more to seize the economic opportunities offered by the National Recovery and Resilience Plan funds rather than putting students' educational guidance at the centre of the process. The output of the a/r/tography realised by the team clearly highlights this criticality («so many billions, so few rules and no good ideas»), as well as the passive role of the teacher.

Insights from the walkthrough a/r/tography

The workshop yielded several relevant insights. The first significant lesson to be learned regards the diversity in modes of expression and affective responses observed during the collective presentations. Each group engaged with the exercise differently, producing a range of outputs that

reflect distinct affective regimes (Dernikos et al., 2020). Some players responded with a sarcastic or satirical tone, while others adopted an ethical-political or more descriptive approach. Working on and with digital platforms thus seems to be as much about feeling and emotion than it is about cognition; we have sought to give voice to this plurality of emotions and experiences rather than measure or compare them.

Another observation concerns the immediacy and speed with which digital platforms are typically consumed which were found to have profound implicit effects that often bypass conscious cognitive elaboration (Webb, Sellar & Gulson, 2020). However, when players were provided with tools to rationalise their initial experiences, this fast, affective engagement was transformed into a slower, more reflexive process. The role-playing game itself acted as a catalyst for this critical detachment, enabling players to step back from the platform and develop a more autonomous and critical stance toward its functionalities (also by “obliging” them to distance themselves from their real-life role).

A further reflection is about the relationship between participants, facilitators and their mutual engagement with the methodology. While we aimed to support the process without imposing our interpretations, the language used in the facilitation process remained somewhat esoteric and inaccessible to non-experts. For instance, the categories of the walkthrough-game board were sometimes misunderstood, pointing to a persistent challenge in bridging the gap between academic discourse and public engagement. This led to a twofold consideration: on the one hand the chance to come back on the material resources, e.g. clarifying and simplifying the categories of the analytic grid; and on the other the meaningfulness of the facilitators’ presence and work in a public sociology perspective.

A fourth point is the complexity of the role-playing exercise, particularly for adult players. Many found it challenging to embody the perspective of younger users when navigating the platform. This suggests that, while role-play can be a powerful tool for fostering empathy and critical reflection on digital means (Albrecht et al., 2019), it also exposes generational gaps in the digital experience, complicating the process of identification with unfamiliar user roles.

Finally, even though the players were already attuned – sometimes even in a passionate or activist manner – to the relationship between politics and technology, the workshop emphasised the inherently performative and political character of digital means. This collective awareness among participants indicates that future iterations of the project could further enrich this understanding across different social contexts.

Conclusion

Our experiment in the *public sociology of educational technology* has been an attempt to develop a way of engaging collectively with digital platforms and make them a collective *matter of concern*. Through the combination of the walkthrough method and a/r/tography, here, a public platform is problematized: it is no longer considered a *matter of fact*, something to be accepted as taken for granted, and become something to discuss, dis-assemble and re-assemble. They cease to be an inert means and indisputable background and start to be considered in their capacity to act and shape the conduct of the users. The experiment involves potential users in a collective exercise that raises awareness and reflexivity of its workings. Further experiments with other audiences will help to refine its features and make it a useful tool to be generalised in other settings. There is a need to test the methodology with other public to make it more scalable and generalizable. Nevertheless, the experiment describes the platform as a *composite thing* that can be dis-assembled and re-assembled. It opens a space where the platform is problematised and new reconfiguration possibilities are imagined.

These movements from the “digital” to the “paper” and the “digital” again reveal its underlying logic. It is mainly designed to strengthen the link between school and the labour market, making the educational dimension peripheral or subsumed by the expectations and the underlying goals of digital capitalism. Student profiles are at the centre stage, so that students are mostly seen as “producers of certificates”, as “bearers of competencies” to be accumulated; teachers are considered as tutors that accompany students in compliance to the mechanisms of guidance towards the market, and parents are meant to be managers of student performances. The experiment displays how profiles are only a person’s proxies; “digital doubles” that enhance their values as long as they accumulate certificates in a pre-defined list of competencies that are the curriculum of the digital economy. They reset the bodies, the complexities of the individuals, and the social contexts. Each profile tends to configure the student as “homo oeconomicus”, putting aside failures, disabilities, ethnic backgrounds, social classes, and collectivities. Social inequalities are reduced to individual differences in efforts and abilities.

In that experiment, the complex machinery of the neo-liberal regime is revealed through exercise of epistemic justice mobilising other circuits of knowledge in an aesthetic and ironic re-appropriation of the public platform. In this collective work there is complicity between participants and researchers, so that participants become co-researchers and lately a co-

designers opening to alternative possibilities or distance with respect to the object of investigation. Here, the making of the sociology of digital education platform is not marked by the asymmetry between the researcher and the participant, and the closeness between them favours a process in which knowing, learning and redesigning are not sequentially articulated but intersected and emergent. That way, critique is exercised through a specific affective attunement that enacts a love for the world. It is not accompanied by distancing, suspicion, and resentment towards the platform. It is characterised by joy, care, and is oriented instead towards a re-appropriation and reconfiguration of its configuration that escapes both from the easy techno-utopianism and from the gloomy digital catastrophism. In so doing it does not limit to negative but promotes affirmative critique and “post-critiqueness” (Oliverio, 2020; Hodgson, Vlieghe, & Zamojski, 2018).

Further iterations of the experiment will be carried out to refine and consolidate the collective work of research. The first exercise describes the need for an attentive dosage between methodological rigour and art-based knowledge sensitivities, that is the development of a complex apparatus of research and intervention to make an affirmative sociology of public digital platform a reality.

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