WYRED Project- Methods, Learning and Insights

Introduction

The WYRED project is funded through the Horizon 2020 EU Research and Innovation programme and provides a space for children and young people to engage in reflection about their digital lives. To date, the nine partners have guided over 1000 children and young people over two years to ask questions and carry out research about themes and ideas that affect and shape their interactive, performative and communicative worlds with especial focus on subjects relating to the digital society. Through these efforts, the children and young people have navigated and explored aspects of an ever evolving landscape where their experience of growing up and maturing has been in many ways mediated by technological developments and experiments. Through WYRED, the partners have listened carefully and remained tuned into their critical analysis, but the emphasis has been on the autonomy of the young participants to define their agenda and direct their own exploration.

This article presents an overview of the WYRED methodology and shares how it has been successfully designed, tested and applied within a wide range of settings, including primary schools, colleges, universities, youth centres and community-based organisations. The article also shares some of the emerging thematic insights.

Method

The WYRED methodological approach involves a series of linked phases.

1. This begins with a consultation phase involving outreach and engagement work and a social dialogue process. In this initial step, the children and young people (aged from seven to twenty five) are brought together and facilitated by the partner organisations and colleagues in formal and informal educational settings to examine digital society issues and concerns, using age appropriate facilitation techniques and tools.

2. This work leads to a second phase of research definition. Through the articulation of research questions, the children and young people are again supported by WYRED partners to consider the key issues in more depth.

3. The next stage in the process involves an action dimension. The research question becomes articulated as a research project. This can take a wide range of forms, from the development of a video response, a podcast discussion, journaling or blogging, through to the writing of poetry.

4. These projects are then analysed in the final phase, with the facilitators and the children and young people working together to interpret their work, their responses and attribute further

meaning to these phases of work. At each phase, the children and young people are being empowered to present their own analysis and critique of the online environment with which they are dealing.

The project has carried out a series of consultation exercises, involving 206 young people and sixty nine stakeholders, including teachers, lecturers and youth workers from twelve countries taking part in the first round, while 260 young people and eighty nine stakeholders participated in a second round. The questionnaires were accessible online, in six languages according to the WYRED partner countries: English, Spanish, German, Italian, Hebrew and Turkish. As well as the seven partner countries, young people from Ukraine, Albania, Portugal, Macedonia and Greece participated in the consultation.

The results from both rounds highlight that young people consistently attribute the highest importance to the issues of "self-image and self-confidence", "tolerance to different cultures/opinions", and "necessary changes in education" as well as "mental wellbeing". The opinions of stakeholders regarding the most important issues is are in general rather similar to those of the young people, except one noticeable difference: the stakeholders attribute much higher importance than young people to the issue of media literacy, namely the reliability of information on the internet and in social media. A further third round of Delphi[1] style consultation work will allow for a comparative look at any emerging trends.

The development and application of the WYRED methodology operated over a series of interlinked cycles. Cycle 1 focused on the testing of this methodology with children and young people across the full partnership. This cycle led to the engagement of over 500 children and young people in a consultative process, leading in turn to 280 of these participating in almost 100 separate projects. An online platform (https://wyredproject.eu/) was developed to allow the sharing of these local projects and promote an engagement between the target groups and key policy stakeholders, from education, youth work and community sectors.

Cycle 2 allowed for further iterations of the methodological steps. Partners have again reached out to over 500 children and young people in consultative forums, facilitating conversations and discussions regarding perceptions about their online lives. Through these social dialogues, a further set of fifty eight research questions were elaborated, leading to a set of almost fifty projects with the

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[1] The Delphi method uses a process framework of multiple rounds of questionnaires sent to a wide panel of experts, in the case of WYRED, children and young people, as well as their teachers, lecturers and youth workers. Several rounds of questionnaires are sent out to the group and the anonymous responses are aggregated after each round. Using multiple rounds of questions, the Delphi method seeks to reach the correct response through consensus.

involvement of over 300 children and young people. Again, these projects have led to the sharing of responses and presentations of solutions to commonly faced challenges within the platform and elsewhere.

Cycle 3 is continuing to further apply the methodology within a range of new settings, including youth centres working with disadvantaged children and young people.

Through participation within these methodological steps, data has been collected by partners within formal and informal education settings, as well as through the specific projects, indicating that the children and young people have developed greater competences in relation to critical analysis, teamwork, presentation, and strategic thinking, as well as feeling more empowered and self-confident.

As well as pushing children and young people to develop deeper understanding of aspects of their online lives, engagement within WYRED has also supported them in linking their findings to potential follow up actions. Children and young people were successful in entering their research projects into national scientific competitions, they presented to politicians and policymakers on local, national and international stages, they influenced how their schools are run and they created new networks where they can create influence. A series of detailed case studies are available through the platform that highlights these findings.

Findings: Emerging thematic insights

A study of all WYRED research projects and activities has found that the focus of children and young people has tended to centre on six thematic areas.

Firstly, they have examined "self-image and its presentation online" and its relationship with resilience. Children and young people carried out a range of projects that looked at the construction of individual identities, offline and online, as well as strategies as to how positive self-image can be promoted, at the level of the individual, but also at group or classroom level. They were concerned about issues of vulnerability, stigma and stereotype. The sharing of experiences in their groups and in the dissemination of their findings acted in itself as an empowering process.

A second thematic area relates to "gender discrimination and gender differences online, stereotyping" and its relationship with the idealisation of online identity. The manner in which offline gender stereotypes can be reinforced within online activities and platforms was studied, including developing understanding as to whether creative contributions of women were less encouraged and recognized than those of men in areas such as the arts and sciences.

A third theme linked "Internet safety and privacy, cyberbullying, online abuse and cyber security" and concentrated on the importance of consistency. Children and young people reviewed the guidance and tips about how and why to stay safe online, asking for greater awareness-raising and understanding for parents, teachers and youth workers. They highlighted the need for the voice of the young person to be included in examining how best to address any challenges associated with online abuse, especially concerning situations of cyberbullying.

A fourth area of WYRED project focus covered "living on social media, living with stress" and the performative nature of an online identity. How children and young people deal with the performative aspect of their online lives represents an important focus here. They point to a range of pressures and how they need to respond. This creates and sustains stress. These pressures are noted across many different WYRED projects across ages, countries and settings. Young people understand how their responses can lead to more stress within a social media vacuum that requires constant perfection. To counter this, young people deliver insights regarding the importance of developing coping mechanisms and understanding resilience from a younger age. Such life skills can then allow the child or young person to develop their online identity in a positive manner.

A fifth area of focus for WYRED participants concerned "access to reliable information, and fake news, media literacy" and the complicated nature of trust. Even for the youngest cohorts of WYRED participants, fake news was a fascination. Through their research into this area, they quizzed their peers with regard to how they might understand what is real and what it false with regard to media representations of events. WYRED research developed analysis and deeper understandings of how news stories are reported and interpreted. The children and young people highlighted the importance of trusting information sources. Within an online environment, this is increasingly challenging.

The sixth key thematic area regards "digital participation and activism, digital divide" and the corresponding fear of digital exclusion. Many young people were interested in how future developments in education and work associated with technology would impact on divisions and barriers within society. They consistently point to uncertainty and vulnerability. The digital world can be potentially seen to further entrench a range of disadvantages. WYRED participants focused on how best to use new media to energise and develop new responses to these structural factors. The development of local community level or school-based campaigns has been made easier through access to digital tools. Creative approaches to promoting community learning can be supported by such online approaches. Key within this type of communicative response is the recognition that

digital exclusion represents a real fear for children and young people, thus mirroring and reinforcing social and economic exclusion.

Discussion / Conclusion

Through this wide range of WYRED research projects into the attitudes and perspectives of children and young people, there is a trend whereby the majority feel relatively optimistic about their own future, appreciating better access to educational opportunities and a better health outlook than their parents' generations. However, the backdrop to this optimism can be considered an almost pervasive lack of faith in institutions and in politics. The children and young people are concerned about their environment and democratic structures. However, they do not regard themselves as "radicals" when they are posing questions regarding our "grown-up" responses to the many existential threats that they are highlighting. Many of these children and young people felt that their desire and need to "act" was linked to the inaction of the adult world.

The WYRED projects highlight how these young people can shape and direct their online interactions, thereby appearing to enhance their autonomy and personal agency. However, they are also examining potential correlations between rates of depression amongst teenagers and time spent on social media. They are consistently displaying a sophisticated analysis of how they manage this balancing act between public and private narratives, positive and negative self-image and these interplays.

Through participation within WYRED project developments and responses, children and young people are articulating questions that they want to answer; they are expressing their desires; yet are acknowledging that they are often unsure or unaware of their vulnerabilities. There is a clear ambivalence in how they feel about the way their online lives are being governed. The positive opportunities that are being put forward by children and young people are in counterpoint to potential unhappiness, anxiety and lack of control. This core ambivalence represents an important insight that has emerged through the WYRED project.

References

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