Pitfalls of Enthusiasm: Questioning our Assumptions
By Reflecting on our own Research Practices

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Abstract
It is not accidental that by problematizing the question, we, as researchers, begin to 'learn by doing' and formulate 'what works' within our research design. If we add the dimension of different languages, countries, and research practices to our intended study, we find ourselves not only 'questioning what we do, but how we do it'. The following critique begins by situating the context of our pilot study on digital media and teaching practices in primary schools, and the ways in which through our own enthusiasm and interest, (often misguided at times), we developed our research design by "questioning our own practices and reflecting on our actions". The continued negotiations of meaning and understanding which contributed to our research study are discussed as a means to 'uncover, (re)discover, and re-frame' our intentional, and unintentional means of 'learning by doing' as we address the 'pitfalls of enthusiasm in our own learning".

Introduction
The often cited motto 'Pessimism of the Intellect, Optimism of the Will', repeatedly mentioned by Gramsci (1975) in his prison notebooks, can be read as encompassing two crucial features. The first feature of critical research, namely is the intention of identifying and challenging oppressive power relations through the constant questioning of what we know and how we turn it into 'scientific knowledge' (critics or 'pessimism of the intellect'). The second feature, our attempt as researchers to empower the research participants, by opening spaces for active engagement and dialogue with participants (empowerment or 'optimism of the will'), as discussed further in this paper.

We will examine, in this paper, how we attempted to put into practice this motto in our pilot study on digital media and teaching practices in primary schools. Specifically, we will consider how our attempt, or more specifically our reflection on our attempts, contributed to changing some aspects of our research design, as well as our ways to address and include teachers and children in the research process. Indeed, although our research study reflects a comparison between Italy and the U.S.A., in this paper we concentrate on the results from the pilot study conducted in one primary school located in the countryside of Verona (Italy). We will discuss the strengths and weaknesses of specific research methods that we employed during the pilot study and the impact of our approach to achieving the overall aim of our study.

A socio-cultural approach to the study of technology integration in the classroom
Unlike many other research projects in the field of Educational Technology, this study neither focuses on the impact of digital technology on learning nor does it focus on how digital technologies can be used to train the 21st century workforce. As Selwyn (2012) and others argue, most educational technology writers and researchers focus mainly on the potential of technology use to 'enhance' learning and cognitive development, with little or no concern for the 'wider' aspects and contributions to education and society. Our study, in continuity with the research tradition of Cultural Studies, does not place the central emphasis on the effects of media on behavior, learning and attitudes, but rather on the ways in which meanings are established, negotiated and circulated, as well as on the ways in which power relationships are reproduced, resisted and negotiated in everyday life (Hall et al., 1980; Buckingham, 2008). Hence, our project shifts the focus from 'media effects' on teaching and learning to the critical understanding of how teachers and students make sense of different educational and teaching practices with digital media in their educational settings within the wider society.

Broadly speaking, we take a 'socio-cultural' approach to the study of technology integration in the classroom (Buckingham, 2007; Selwyn et al., 2010; Selwyn, 2011; Scott et al., 2015) in order to highlight teachers' and students' critical and reflective thinking when engaging with technologies in school settings. From this perspective we focus on what Brehony (2002:181) termed as "the (relative?) Autonomy of classroom life", where teachers and learners negotiate the technological situations they encounter, and where local interactions are informed by broader social conditions. In this sense, digital technology use can be seen as a site for interactions between and within groups of teachers and students that are centered on issues of negotiation, meaning-making and identity formation. Moreover, following Apple's (2010) analysis of unequal relations of power, we aim at producing critical

understandings that situate educational technology within the lived realities of schooling and the conflictual spaces that are generated by these relationships in society.

Moving from theory to research practice we translate this broad approach into an empirical analysis of how teachers and students represent digital technology use in education. In this sense, we recognize language as a key element in informing ideas and shaping actions, including digital technology use, within any educational context (Selwyn, 2015). As we will clarify later through a description of our research methods, on the one hand we are interested in understanding the actual uses of digital technology in school and this will be explored through observations of classroom activities with and without digital technology. On the other hand, starting from the assumption that language use is a crucial social practice to make sense of our actions, identities and relations, we take a 'discursive perspective' (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Fairclough, 2003; Rogers, 2004) on the representations of digital technology constructed by teachers and students. From this perspective, what research participants say (but also write or draw) is not regarded as a self-evident reflection of what they 'really' think or believe, but rather as a form of socially situated performance through which they do not just represent their experience of digital technology but they also enact both social relationships as well as the specific subject positions that they occupy.

Reflective Practice in Education: the "pitfalls"- limits, and challenges
We understand that the power of knowing our philosophical orientations enables us to be reflective, (Argyris and Schon, 1974) and to better understand and appreciate our activities. From this perspective, reflective practice is instrumental in not only understanding the teacher's technological philosophy, but how he/she has internalized technological integration into his/her teaching practice. Reflective practice is used here to serve more than understanding the impact we are making; it serves to know the impact we *want* to make (Elias & Merriam, 2005). To know what impact we desire, we must ask ourselves what we believe is the purpose of education. Additionally, we need to know why we make the choices we do about the use of technologies in our everyday practices, and what we expect to achieve with these technologies in relation to our educational aims and goals. From a pedagogical perspective, if we recognize the value of the research participant's and the ways in which they make sense of their experiences, we are inevitably assuming that teachers' and students' reflexivity is key not only to understand but also to orient their actions (Dewey, 1933). Moreover, according to a 'critical pedagogy' orientation, when we include children's voices in research studies we should attempt to provide some kind of empowerment to the young participants themselves, and not exclusively to the teachers who are usually the recipients and far more present in these types of research investigations. In general, reflective practice is understood as the process of learning through and from experience towards gaining new insights of self and/or practice (Boud et al., 1985; Mezirow, 1981; Jarvis, 1992). This often involves examining assumptions of everyday practice.

It also tends to involve the individual practitioner in being self-aware and willing to critically evaluate his or her own responses to practice situations. The point of reflective practice is to recapture practice experiences and examine them critically in order to gain new understandings and inevitably improve future practice. This is part

of the connected processes of life-long learning, and understood as a fundamental positive outcome of reflexivity in identity formation and teaching practice.

However, the ways in which reflective practice have been applied, has evoked serious criticism and concern that challenge the productiveness of reflective practice in action. For example, when reflective practice is used easily as a 'band-aide solution', or mechanically imposed as an empty rhetoric where little or no deep thinking is involved, the outcome of reflection in action, contributes to greater misunderstanding and difficulties rather than serving as a means to address concerns in a productive way. As Larrivee (2000:293) has argued:

> Unless teachers develop the practice of critical reflection, they stay trapped in unexamined judgments, interpretations, assumptions, and expectations. Approaching teaching as a reflective practitioner involves fusing personal beliefs and values into a professional identity.

While Schon's work has inspired many different models of reflection and categories of reflective practice, it has also drawn criticism. Eraut (2004) faults Schon's work for its lack of precision and clarity, while Boud and Walker (1998) had argued that Schon's analysis ignores critical features relating to the context of reflection. Earlier works by Usher et al., (1997) also find Schon's account and methodology as 'unreflective'. This particular issue is further elaborated by Smyth (1989) who has asserted that Schon's work is not theoretical and apolitical, while Greenwood (1993) attacks Schon for downplaying the importance of reflection-before-action. It is from this specific point of departure that we begin our pilot research study and consider the uses of reflections before-action, in-action, and after-action in our study. It is not our intention to 'prove or disprove' the arguments that support or challenge the practice of reflection, but rather to consider whether the uses of reflection within our own pilot study have meaningful outcomes. What do we learn about the participants and their making sense of digital technology within schools through the different levels of reflection?

The use of reflexivity as 'heuristic tool' in the pilot study

Reflexivity is widely recognized as a key concept in qualitative research. Although the issues raised in this paper interrelate to some extent to the broad issues of power, we understand reflexivity mainly as a 'heuristic tool' through which we attempt to make sense of our own role as researchers in the (co)construction of knowledge (Finlay, 2002). Broadly speaking, we try to make explicit how inter-subjective and contextual elements impact on our data collection. Furthermore, in line with feminist and critical versions of reflexivity in qualitative research (Reinharz, 1992), we enact self-reflexivity also to acknowledge (when present) the tensions arising from different social positions, for example in relation to age, class, gender, and race. Indeed, here we seek to situate our interpretations of the encounters between researchers and participants within a theoretical framework about the social construction of power. Hence, we further question the impact of our research study in terms of the empowerment, participation, the learning that we are thinking about, and/or our willing to promote, rather than taking for granted that our research is empowering simply because we operate within a critical theory of education.

In the context of the pilot study, reflexivity also served another practical (or pragmatic) purpose, namely the identification and re-design of (more) effective and suitable data collection strategies and tools. We asked: To what extent, do our specific data collection tools help (or hinder) the collection of 'rich' and significant accounts of participants' practices with digital media in school? Before illustrating how we attempted to answer, it is necessary to provide some information about a) the overall research strategy characterizing our international research study; b) the people that took part in the pilot study in the area of Verona (Italy); and c) the research tools adopted to collect our qualitative data.

Our research strategy consists of a multiple case study (Yin, 2003) through which teaching and educational practices with digital media in different geographical contexts are examined and compared. The empirical study will be carried out in Italy – in the cities of Rome and Verona –   and in the U.S.A. (in the city of Buffalo, NY). By March 2016, approximately 100 primary school teachers and 120 students (aged 6-11) will have contributed to the empirical phase of the research.

The research team consisted of three researchers with diverse experiences in the field (a Full professor, an Associate professor and Senior Researcher). Two white male Italian researchers and one female of color American researcher contributed to different components of the research study. All of the researchers were present during the first session of data collection of the pilot study (interviews with teachers) whilst only the two Italian researchers conducted the second part of the pilot (observation of media classroom activities and group interviews with students).

Two primary school teachers and twenty students (aged 8-9) participated in the pilot study, which took place in one school located in the northern countryside of Verona in Italy. One of the teacher interviews was conducted at the University of Verona. Both of the teacher participants were male, middle age, Italian citizens who were widely acknowledged as experts in digital technology integration in their teaching practice. Part of their expertise as trainers of other teachers was in the uses of interactive whiteboards to teach Mathematics or Natural Sciences. One of the teachers described the attainment of the group of students involved in the pilot study as 'middle-low', in relation to students in his teaching subject (Math).

The data collection tools that were used for this pilot study were: a survey questionnaire with open ended questions for all of the 20 students, semi-structured/individual interviews with the two teachers, semi-structured focus group interviews with 6 students, and a grid of observation for the reporting of media classroom activities. The period of time that was spent collecting and analyzing data extended from July – September 2015.

Teachers' reflective practices and the pitfalls of enthusiasm

In the course of the pilot interviews with teachers, we experienced some pitfalls of enthusiasm in relation to 'reflective practice' (specifically the listening to - and taking about - 'reflexive teaching practice'). The pilot interviews with teachers were conducted by the male researchers, the full professor lead both the interviews, followed by further exploration and questions for clarification by the senior researcher. The female researcher observed the interviews and documented questions

for discussion with the research team. These roles reflect the established power differentials embedded within the academic learning structure. As previously noted, we enact self-reflexivity to acknowledge (when present) the tensions arising from different social positions, for example in relation to age, class, gender, and race. In this case, we have two proficient Italian language speakers who could have equally shared the duties of interviewing. However, without much 'reflection-before' we immediately assumed our respective roles based on the structure and power differentials that are embedded within the academic university structure.

We wish to highlight the social dynamics that are in play within a wider context, and how these tensions can subconsciously become part of the interviewing process. As we will show, in the first case, the teacher may have felt compelled to respond as an 'intellectual' highlighting his expertise as a means to speak as 'equals'. This is further reinforced by the teacher's request to contribute to the university as a potential lecturer for the training of prospective education students. The non-intervening interview style that was used in this first interview resulted in silences that the teacher tried to compensate for by offering repetition of the same discourse.

In practice, the first interview this theoretical enthusiasm translated into the enactment of a non-interventionist interview style. The interview style seems to contribute to how the teacher somewhat avoids to answer the very first question. Instead, the teacher repetitively reorients the interview toward his understanding of technology, or his teaching style, as demonstrated in the following extract:
Extract of Interview #1:

Researcher: *Could you provide us with some background information to 'frame', why and when you choose to become a teacher, what were your expectations, your dreams, your ideas and when did you start using media in school? Hence, these are essentially two issues:* **why you wanted to be a teacher,** *how you decided ,and then* **when you began to use media in school,** *which (media) and why.*

Teacher #1 : *Well, I entered the school in 1981, so you see I entered accidentally, because in truth I was working as a builder, and because my mother had brought – the usual mums that bring - 'listen to me, you have to apply for the (teachers') substitutions…so I began, I fell, I say,* **I fell in love with the job…in love…It's something I have always wanted – then I will come back to the technologies.**

Researcher: *Yes, yes, take your time*

Teacher #1: *I mean I don't distinguish between this (points to the desk) and…that (points to paper) it is all the same to me* **technology is also the paper sheet, technology is the box, it is this (the counting blocks) I mean everything is technology**. [Continues for 5 Minutes to talk about his understanding of technology]

In terms of reflective practice, we recognize the limitations of reflection in so far as no one from the research team stopped the teacher from continuing down this path. On the one hand we were understandably and genuinely committed to listening but on the other we obviously did not 'reflect-in-action', as indicated in this extract. It was apparent that both the non-interventionist interviewing style and our reflections-after, necessitated changes to our interviewing style.

There are a number of concerns that can prevent further exploration of the research investigation. In this first case, the quality of the collected data can potentially lead to a repetition of the same discourse, rather than explore the understanding of the teacher and how s/he makes sense of digital media. Furthermore, there is a chance of the interviewee reverting back to the comfortable role of "Teaching the Researcher" rather than reflecting on his/her own practice. Finally, sometimes a discomfort with silence may invoke comments that are less directed at the questions that are being asked, and rather serve as 'filler" for the silence lapses or gaps in the conversation. In light of this first pilot interview, the research team agreed to take a more interventionist approach to the second interview. As illustrated in this example, the second interview was heavily structured in interview style through which the value of the teacher's practice was constantly reaffirmed and theorized by the interviewer.

Extract from Interview #2:

Researcher: […] *We know* that sometimes the *teacher doesn't care about books, I mean books are interesting but what is it worth is the daily work and what he invents day by day* that often, actually almost always, *the teacher creates his own didactics, he invents the solutions, let's say he/she is creative indeed, and after all he (or she) lets himself (or herself) lead by a theory. What he/she creates is his/her pedagogical faith and his/her teaching faith*

Teacher: *I understand very well* (laugh)

Researcher: *What?*

Teacher: *I understand very well …*

Researcher: *So this is also to take a distance, also as academics, by the way I was a teacher, I've been a teacher for 14 years*

Teacher: *So* (implying share understanding)

Researcher: *And so I remember* [memories about the past job as teacher]

This extract appropriately exemplifies the researcher's attempt to value teaching practice, as well as to reduce hierarchical relations at work in terms of social status (academic and teacher). On the one hand the use of pronoun 'we' can be read as implying 'we academics' that value teachers' practice. On the other hand the disclosure of the past personal experience could potentially work as icebreaking move toward a more equal dialogue.

However, we found that theoretical and personal alignments with the perspective informed by the interviewers may limit the contributions of the teacher participant. Strong alignments in the course of the interview limit the quality of the collected data and can potentially lead to "too many chefs in the kitchen". The illusion of balancing the power relations through a more open and democratic/ interventionist interviewing style, may be possible in principle, but rather difficult to execute in practice. There is always the danger, and the risk, of patronizing the interviewee (teacher) if there are

too many references that are aligned to the status of the interviewer, his/her personal academic experiences or theoretical knowledge during the interview process.

Students Voices and the pitfalls of enthusiasm

Similar to power dynamics evident in interviews with the teachers, a similar interplay of power occurred with students. In this case the two Italian researchers were present. They presented and administered the questionnaire to the 20 students and after they equally participated in the conversation by asking questions to the 6 children involved in the focus group. As we will discuss, the researchers in the course of the focus group followed a pre-defined protocol but they often changed or rephrased some questions. Here the language used in the questionnaire, or during the focus group activities, played a key function in promoting understanding or preventing comprehension of the questions that were asked. Furthermore we noticed how language use served to encourage or at times mitigate 'school-learned responses' from children. In sum, here our research practice sometimes failed to make the participant's voices heard as expected.

During the focus group we recognized (reflection-in-action) that changes to some of the questions were needed. For the students who participated in the focus group, some of the questions were too general or abstract for the children to understand. For example, a couple of students couldn't understand this question: 'In your opinion, do you see any relation between what you do at school with digital technologies and what you do at home?'. Hence, we rephrased the question by dividing it into two very specific questions: a) *What did you learn by using digital media outside school?,* and b) *Could the things you have learned outside school also be taught in school?*. These reframed questions provided students with more opportunities to engage in a conversation about their actual experience rather than frustrating students to respond to more abstract forms of reasoning/thinking. Students moved from monosyllabic or minimal answers to the first question, to more elaborated answers to the two newly reframed questions. This constant process of simplifying and clarifying the questions in the course of the focus group interviews resulted in the rewriting of some of the questions for the final interview schedule.

A similar problem arose with other questions in the questionnaire. A small number of students were not all able to understand the question, whilst the vast majority of children replied with very brief answers and/or had drawn very minimal visual representations of their media classroom experiences. The question was formulated as follow: *'What is your most favorite thing to use digital technology in school for (write and/or draw)?'*. A small number of students provided representations of out-of-school experiences, which was the theme of the following question. When asked about this choice, this sub-group of students claimed that they did not understand the question. This response provided evidence of the lack of clarity of the questions for some students. As we look at the majority of students that understood the question their written answers were very brief. For example: *"Because I like to watch the picture on the tablet and because I like to play."* or *"I like to use the interactive whiteboard because we can learn and have fun."* Most of the drawings were limited to the basic representations of some devices, for example a black square representing the interactive whiteboard or children using a tablet.

Although some of the questions provided opportunities for students to draw rather than write, we actually found that the more insightful representations of classroom experience were found in some unexpected and/or unplanned students' drawings that were requested by the teacher, not by the researchers. The teacher's articulation for the students to portray the lesson that was taught during our observation resulted in more elaborate and insightful representations of student experiences with digital media in the classroom. This specific moment raised the question as to why students responded differently to the teacher's request than the researcher's request. Was this a '*learned response*'? and if so, how might the we further use these representations for informing our understanding of students' uses and understandings of digital media in schools?

Some of the students' unexpected and insightful responses led us to make other changes to the research study. For example, most of the students portrayed in their drawings the table that they used in the classroom where they were engaged in an exercise. However, only a few of the children's drawings reflected the interactive whiteboard that was used. The presentation and discussion related to the drawings function as a hint about how students make sense of digital media in their own contexts.

We asked students' to comment on the drawings of the lesson as part of the pilot focus group. At the very end of the group interview, students were asked to rank the drawings from their most favorite to the least favorite representation of media classroom experience. Students were asked to provide an explanation about their choices. The children seemed more willing and comfortable to comment on their drawings, rather than talking about their 'learning'. Almost all of the participants echoed the same explanation about their choices, limiting diversity of students' perspectives. We devised a new question in the form of group work in which children were encouraged to talk amongst themselves rather than merely dialoguing with the interviewer. Students were asked to discuss and work collaboratively with peers who had similar individual rankings of the drawings. Students were expected to respond as a 'group' not individually. The final rankings were to be provided in a format that a jury would use in an Art Festival. Interestingly, this more children-led discussion resulted in a more inclusive discussion strategy as also the less participative children in the previous researcher-led discussion proactively engaged more in the group discussion. In sum, the presentation and discussion as related to the drawings functioned as a clue on how to explore more productively the way students make sense of digital media in their own social contexts.

Since this task provided students with more opportunities to engage genuinely in the research process, we decided to include this activity in the final focus group protocol. The 'jury's role play' was proposed as follows:

> '*In the questionnaire everyone represented through a drawing, or a written description, a classroom activity using digital media. Now each student should show and present his/her work by explaining why a particular activity was chosen. After the presentations, students should discuss, as if they were members of a jury, required to decide and rank the drawing or written description. Finally, students will present the motivations/reasons for their choices.*'

As suggested, we replaced the question about student's favorite uses of digital media in and out of school with a new question that echoed the teacher's request to represent the lesson through a drawing, despite the more structured approach involved. We asked students to assess their media uses with positive, neutral or negative symbols and provide an illustration of their ideas. We tried to offer a wider set of options to connote the experiences of students with digital media. We made this choice in order to accommodate the diversity of connotations (read 'not exclusively positive') of digital media provided by children in the course of the focus group responses. For example, we replaced the question about in-school uses of digital media "*What is your most favorite thing to use digital technology for in school? (write and/or draw*)- with the following request: "*Draw and/or tell, using some words, a lesson, or a moment of work, where you used digital media at school.*" Before responding to this question, students were directed to "*think about whether you enjoyed the lesson". If you did not like it put a circle around the symbol" –", if you liked it on average circle the symbol "+/-", and if you enjoyed it a lot circle the symbol" +".* After the pilot study and re-design of data collection tools, our following sessions of work in the classroom actually resulted in more engaging and inclusive discussions with the young participants.

Conclusion

The recognition of some of these pitfalls in our initial enthusiasm enabled us to frame even more critically our research design and thus to perform a pessimism of the reason. However at the same time, a more grounded optimism of will also emerged. This latter outcome is not lead by a blind-faith toward the critical pedagogy embedded in our theoretical framework, but rather by a critical and dialectic praxis between theory and (research) practice. In this respect , as Buckingham, (1998:12) has stated

> *Rather than regarding academic theory as a repository of truth,*
> *our commitment here is to praxis– in other words, to a*
> *dialectical relationship between theory and practice. Indeed,*
> *we would argue that any meaningful pedagogic theory*
> *has to be able to take account of the experience of classroom*
> *practice; and that practice is a site on which new*
> *theoretical insights and challenges can be generated.*

As we have seen, the critical questioning of research practice clearly represents a condition of existence for 'critical research' (an epistemological issue) but somewhat it also might function as conditions of existence of any truly supporting relationship between academic researchers, teachers and children (an ethical issue). From this perspective, our critical questioning contributed not only to change some aspects of our research strategy but also to ground our research practice on the messy and complex realities of classroom practices, languages and cultures. However, we will need to be constantly open to revising, the interpretations, being aware of the unavoidable limits, given that as Cesare Pavese (2000) has stated, "The professionalism of the enthusiasm is the most sickening of insincerities".

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