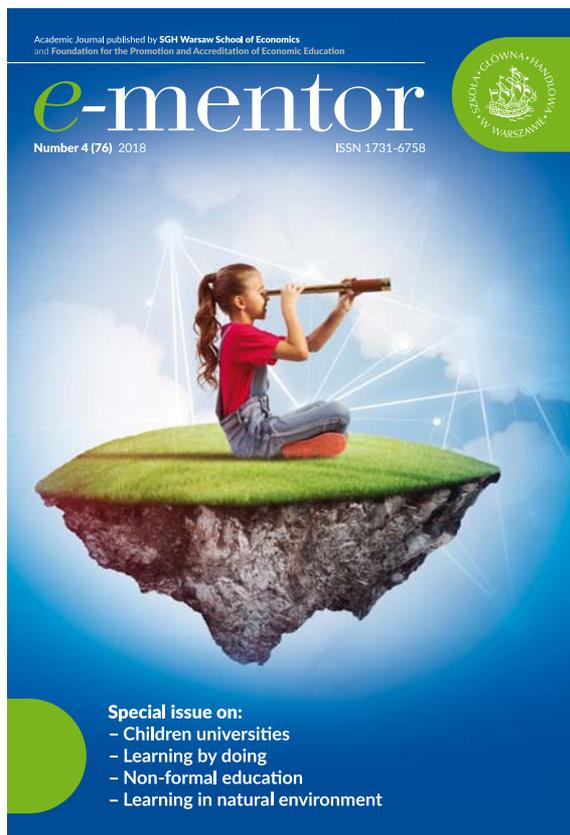


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DWUMIESIĘCZNIK SZKOŁY GŁÓWNEJ HANDLOWEJ W WARSZAWIE
WSPÓŁWYDAWCA: FUNDACJA PROMOCJI I AKREDYTACJI KIERUNKÓW EKONOMICZNYCH

2018, nr 4 (76)



Aleksander Schejbal, Ben McManus, *Young people's progression into digital creativity. Comparison of research findings from the UK and Poland*, „e-mentor” 2018, nr 4(76), s. 38–40, <http://dx.doi.org/10.15219/em76.1375>

Young people's progression into digital creativity. Comparison of research findings from the UK and Poland

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Education Centre EST from Wadowice (Poland) and Wavemaker from Stoke-on-Trent (the UK) carried out an Erasmus+ project in the field of Youth aimed at building a makerspace for young people – MakeApp Club¹ – in order to foster their digital creativity in a social learning environment.

The project was inspired by the research conducted in the UK by Julian Sefton-Green and Lucy Brown for Nominet Trust with the findings presented in the report Mapping Learner Progression into Digital Creativity². They have investigated the issue how young people learn and develop as digital makers with a view to fostering more effective support. The main conclusions of the research are the following:

- Self-teaching (autodidacticism) of digital skills is very important as a personal discipline required in a changeable labor market.
- Young people who had successfully built digital careers were able to give their areas of interest a clear form and purpose, forging links with tech communities and relating their own learning to employment opportunities.
- Possessing a technical expertise in a chosen area of digital creativity is not enough – progressing in gaining digital expertise must be allied with other forms of progression.
- Access to mentors significantly increases the likelihood that a young person would progress in the fields represented by mentors.
- Attending extra-curricular initiatives and learning how interest in digital tech might relate to the labor market is essential in building a career identity.
- Young people needed at least one 'support system' (e.g. family, school teachers, mentors in extra-curricular establishments) in order to progress.
- School is not enough to prepare young people to be successful digital makers. More efforts should be made to create stronger and more

integrated links between school and non-school digital making activities.

- There is the need to move beyond a narrow view of technical skill progression and create a diverse range of learning experience that also encompasses participation in social networks, access to competent teachers and mentors and engaged learning activities.

These conclusions presented in the British report raise a number of questions for a much broader context than the UK. After all, the above issues are valid everywhere where fostering digital creativity becomes a priority in a modern economy driven by technology. Accordingly, it was interesting to conduct a similar survey in Poland based on interviews with young people who had been successful in the field of IT. Success in this context primarily means getting a satisfying job in the IT industry, which in the case of Polish respondents happened relatively early, even before graduation. An interesting and well-paid job, opening further prospects for professional career at the age of 20–22 years old is a significant achievement, encouraging a closer examination of the paths that make such a success possible.

The interviews with young digital makers in Poland were based on the biographical research methodology used in the UK. Nevertheless, the scope of the Polish survey was smaller – 20 interviews with young people studying IT and/or working in the IT field were conducted while the British report was based on 40 interviews with young people at the threshold of their career. The most informative interviews were then summarized in the form of biographical 'maps' to outline the pathways the young people had taken into the field of digital creativity. The main categories in which their progression was 'mapped' are the following:

- people that influenced their development,
- places where the young people engaged in digital creativity,
- areas of interest and future.

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¹ <https://makeapp.club/>

² <https://socialtechtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Mapping-learner-progression-into-digital-creativity-FINAL.pdf>

Young people's progression into digital creativity...

What follows is a brief outline of the findings from the Polish interviews in comparison to the findings formulated in the British report.

There is a clear convergence of the ways young Poles and Britons develop their creative digital skills. The first characteristic feature of the progression of people interviewed in the UK and Poland is their willingness and ability to explore technology on their own, developed relatively early, often whilst in the primary school. It seems that without this ability to devote a significant portion of free time to their own independent explorations, all the other factors influencing the development of digital creativity remain in the background. This fact should be taken into account when planning adequate forms of support for this group of young people in a way that may help them use the potential of digital areas of interest in their future careers.

A sharp thesis in the British report – ‘school is not enough’ – is also confirmed by interviews conducted in Poland. In the ongoing debate on the importance of digital literacy education at school, two threads should be distinguished. One thing is universal education, an important part of which is teaching all students digital skills, just as we expect them all to learn reading, writing and counting. Secondly, it is the education of ‘digital creatives’ – people who will be able to create digital tools themselves and, with their help, shape the reality. Young people with this potential quickly rise above the IT curriculum at school and in their free time undertake tasks requiring much higher competences than those that can be gained through computer science lessons. Even if school is initially an inspiration to make such an additional effort, it very soon ceases to be important in further development of digital skills of this narrow group of young people. The role of a good IT teacher in this situation is to go beyond the core curriculum and provide additional, non-standard and motivating tasks. Based on the interviews conducted in Poland, it is difficult to assess the scale of such a teacher's initiatives. It seems that they are scarce – only very few young people mentioned IT teachers among the influential people – those who were significant in the development of their digital competences.

However, the issue of the availability of mentors who could support young people in developing their competences beyond the IT curriculum at school is crucial. The difference between the results of the research carried out in the UK and Poland is significant in this case. In Britain there are many opportunities for engaging in digital making activities in out-of-school environments gathering enthusiasts of digital technology – makerspaces, Fablabs, hackspaces, to list a few of these opportunities (even if those opportunities are not equally available to all). These are not exclusive to young people who are beginning their adventure with coding, programming and designing, as they also invite experts with advanced knowledge and skills in these fields. That creates a space for cooperation, exchange of experience and learning, giving great

development opportunities for young people who participate in such hobbyist communities. None of the Polish respondents took part in this type of activities (the majority of them came from small towns in the Malopolska region). The only form of group activities developing digital skills which surfaced in the interviews were extracurricular IT clubs at school, mainly in the primary and middle schools, but very rarely in the high school. These workshops were run by the same teachers who taught computer science – this meant that the only group of mentors who appeared in interviews in Poland were teachers. Our respondents also mentioned older colleagues, family members, and people met in the internet, but these were all individual cases. We could not identify an organized group or a space giving access to mentors except for sporadic participation of some respondents in virtual social networks focusing on selected areas of digital technology.

The British report underlines the importance of involving young people in informal digital making activities as they open real career prospects. Work in the IT field is teamwork, so early gained experience in cooperation, for example in the creation of a computer game or a digital application is very important here. Makerspaces are social in nature, offering a space for meetups with peers and older colleagues who are already working in the IT industry, thus giving access to first-hand information about the realities in the labor market. It is very difficult to create such opportunities within the framework of formal education. Career counselling at school cannot substitute for authentic interactions in the expert circle of a makerspace in which a young person naturally gets to know the nature of the work that he or she is interested in, as well as trends and career perspectives.

In view of the above findings, we should revisit the issue of self-teaching creative digital skills for emerging careers in the IT field. There are no grounds to negate the declarations of the majority of Polish respondents who are convinced of the importance of their own independent endeavors on the path of professional development. However, a question arises how to support better learning conditions for young people, which would foster both independent creative mindsets and a social dimension that is so characteristic of work in the IT field. The commitment of IT teachers who can go beyond the core curriculum by organizing additional workshops for students is certainly very important. Still the key challenge is the creation of out-of-school establishments that give the opportunity to explore digital technology in an informal cooperation space in which both creative independent contributions of participants and the platform for sharing experience are equally valued and provide for the growth of competences essential for satisfactory work in the IT industry. In the UK the scale of availability of digital makerspaces is incomparably greater than in Poland where such initiatives are relatively new. While building a broad agreement on digital skills development in Poland, it

is worth considering the practicable implications of this state of affairs.

I was very pleased when Aleksander Schejbal got in touch with me to talk about extending the Nominet study in Poland. It is always productive to replicate even qualitative research of this kind and related findings. It is inspiring because alike the young people who galvanized early work in this area, being able to trace the roots of innovation, hard work, motivation and a genuine engagement with the excitement of an emerging academic field is the reason for hope. The sense of ingenuity by young people and the simple desire to create a meaningful pathway as they seek to engage with the world is always something to acknowledge and celebrate. However, both countries

clearly pay lip service to the idea of an entrepreneurial creative technology sector that is not backed up with networks of support, expertise or indeed the investment in the kind of infrastructure which we now know is necessary to make these opportunities available to all. If governments and education policy really want to invest in creative technology futures, putting simply their faith in the young people who are, for a variety of reasons, enabled to kick off this career, is not sufficient. We do seem to know about the mix of social and cultural institutions and practices that may give real opportunities to all young people. This research shows what might be needed to turn such findings into a good policy.

Julian Sefton-Green, professor of media education, Deakin University, Melbourne

LEARN MORE

The results of the MakeApp Club project



Full texts of the British and Polish reports are available at:
<https://socialtechtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Mapping-learner-progression-into-digital-creativity-FINAL.pdf> (UK).



<https://makeapp.club/report/> (PL)



<https://makeapp.club/toolkit/>

Polish and English version available