The Class
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Published by NYU Press

Sefton-Green, Julian and Sonia Livingstone.
The Class: Living and Learning in the Digital Age.
NYU Press, 2016.
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A key challenge we set ourselves in this book was to understand the relations and interconnections among members of the class. In the introduction and chapter 1, we noted that “networks” and “connectedness” are terms often used in initiatives and visions aiming to improve education, quality of social life, and future life chances, by fostering flexible, extensive, and sometimes unanticipated or creative links among people and across places and spheres of knowledge and activity.¹

In this chapter, we explore how interconnected the members of our class were, in what ways, and what such connections meant to the individuals concerned. In the process, we also explore how their lives make connections across the places of school, home, and elsewhere. Then, in the era of Facebook, we wanted to explore what the idea of online connections means to these young people. We mapped their relationships within and beyond the class, asking what they mean for the members and whether online networks reinforce prior connections or create new ones. We also examined how the social worlds of family or community intersected with school-based networks.

Starting with “the class,” this chapter maps the nature and scope of the young people’s social networks to understand what patterns emerge and why. The metaphor of the network allows us to recognize the provisional and shifting nature of the ways that people live their lives, focusing on the communicative flows among people and the interconnections or disconnections that result. By prioritizing links over nodes, the network metaphor offers an alternative to research focused either on particular places (such as the small social worlds of home or school or neighborhood) or on particular individuals. Mapping the networks within and beyond the class also allows us to see the class not as a mere aggregate of individuals or a collection of girls and boys or wealthy and poor children but as a mesh of interconnections.

This approach allows us to question claims that the network has become the “dominant cultural logic” of our time. Kazys Varnelis speaks...
for many contemporary scholars in arguing that, “although subtle, this shift in society is real and radical. During the space of a decade, the network has become the dominant cultural logic.” Yet the existence of (nondigital) social networks is as old as society itself. And perhaps even the network metaphor has its limits as a way of explaining relationships, as it is not obvious how it can be squared with the importance of gender, social class, ethnicity, and locale, all of which play a crucial role in young people’s lives.

Within and Beyond the Class

In some respects, “the class” is a meaningful unit; in other respects, it is a figure of convenience. Having spent several years together, although frequently split into other classes for teaching with at least half of the year group at VFS, the class had developed a set of shared narratives and ways of being comfortable with each other. More widely, the year group—with eight parallel classes—was also important, the source of many friendships for the most of the young people.

Relations within the class varied considerably. Some were fairly superficial—a way of getting on with life at school. Others represented strong friendships that extended beyond the school. Most were in a state of flux, waxing and waning over a matter of months or years. The very notion of the class was more important for some young people than others, and although they had learned to get along with each other, we soon realized that for most of them, the center of gravity of their social worlds lay outside the class. Having had a somewhat troubled start in the school, Gideon talked about the class as a kind of safe haven, a place of familiar faces rather than deep friendships: “Everyone, they might not hang out with each other at break or something, but they will know each other, and they would, like, meet up and talk or something.” For a few of the boys, the class is where friends were to be found; indeed, it was this proximity that enabled friendships to be made easily. But much of the friendliness we witnessed in the class, particularly the comfortable pairing of girls sitting together in tutor time, turned out to have little wider significance.

So what were the intersecting relations within and beyond the class? Beyond being placed in the same class, even seated together by teachers,
what connections do the young people themselves create? And how do learning, social, and digital networks connect? Using the tools of social network analysis, we constructed a series of networks by asking the students nine questions about their relations with each of their classmates in and beyond the life of the school (see the appendix). The whole-class network, shown in figure 3.1, is based on the combined answers to eight of these questions—here we had to omit the question of whom they were Facebook friends with, precisely because everyone who was on Facebook was “friends” with everyone else.

As may be seen in the figure, the network is centered on a strongly reciprocal core of boys (Fesse, Jamie, Gideon, Dom, Sebastian, Nick, Shane, and Adam), linked to a tightly bonded pair of girls, Adriana and Megan, who, although always seated together in the class, were beginning to separate outside it.

Two girls, Sara and Giselle, labeled “gifted and talented” by the school, sat at the front of the class. Their relationship seemed on first impressions to be important; but the network shows that they had few connections to others in the class, and even their pairing turned out to be a matter of convenience. Over time, they were beginning to grow apart—as Sara explained, “we’re more school friends than, like, outside”—but they remained collegial. Neither wished to be in the core group, both valuing distinctive status—Sara described herself as “geeky,” while Giselle defined herself as “arty” from the outset. Such “clever” girls, perhaps, were challenging to the heavily male class centered on a lively world of football and computer games (see later in this chapter).

A group of mainly minority ethnic boys, although from diverse cultural backgrounds, formed a distinct subgroup in the class network, with Mark, Yusuf, Hakim, and Sedat all symmetrically bonded. Joel, a white boy who seemed a rather withdrawn outsider, was included in the group.

The group of girls at the other edge of the network were also all from diverse minority ethnic groups; but their interconnections were rather loose, and they and their mutual friendships were far from homogeneous. As we discuss in chapter 5, the other young people were wary of Lydia, who seemed to engage in unpleasant and difficult interpersonal conflict. She was unable to develop relationships with both teachers and peers and lived a rather fragile life in and out of school.
Figure 3.1. The class as a social network. Note: Paler nodes represent boys, darker nodes girls. Also, the darker the lines, the more intense or frequent the connections between people.
Last but perhaps most interesting in terms of what structures a class may enable, Max, Alice, and Jenna formed a clique, in the language of social network analysis, being a fully connected cluster. Yet they were notably heterogeneous—a middle-class white boy living between separated parents, one girl from a happy and confident family, and another girl of East African origin from a much poorer family. Unlike several of the groupings, the clique was stronger outside the school than inside. We often observed the two girls sitting together in class, but at the end of the day, Max would quietly join them at the school gates, as the three crossed the road to hang out at Alice’s somewhat bohemian, warmly accommodating home.

Beyond the generally well-behaved and fair-minded unity of “the class,” the network diagram shows that the young people’s relations beyond the school followed gender, ethnic, and socioeconomic lines, notwithstanding the democratic ambitions of the school, with its seating plan designed to mix them up, and the constant exhortation to act together “as a class” (see chapter 5). No doubt the school did not expect the class members to act in concert outside its walls, but we picked up from teachers the hope that its norms of civility and fairness would carry over into the rest of the young people’s lives or, at least, that friendships might be more interest based, not necessarily reproducing conventional social distinctions. The football team was the most obvious enactment of this more democratic ideal, with its mixture of boys from different backgrounds.

It is easy to read the whole-class network as reproducing the types of relationship we see in wider British society. Apart from the clique and the “gifted and talented” girls, the core group included all the middle-class (higher socioeconomic status) young people and most of the white ones. However, Shane, Nick, and Fessehaye are important exceptions to this, as is Adam, a white middle-class boy who was less intensely connected to this group. Interestingly, too, while the core group connected boys and girls and was itself ethnically diverse, the groupings of boys and girls from minority ethnic groups on either side of the network were not themselves interconnected. Nor was there much connection between the middle-class white girls and the minority ethnic girls from poorer backgrounds—although an interest in sports and computer gaming created weak links among the boys across class and ethnic lines.
Sara, a “gifted and talented” middle-class mixed-race girl, was connected with the white middle-class girls and boys rather than the poorer girls from minority ethnic groups.

Explaining the Network

While the patterns in the whole-class network might not have surprised its members, they struggled to account for their seeming reproduction of gender, ethnic, and socioeconomic divides because, as we examine further in chapter 5, the school (and the wider society) stressed inclusion. The young people themselves generally endorsed the idea that all should be equal, treated according to their individual merits rather than their demographic background. We asked middle-class Megan, one of the popular girls in the core group, to explain whom she was friends with. Her answer was highly coded, a matter of who lived where and which school they went to:

**INTERVIEWER:** Are you saying that you sort of hang out more with—are these more middle-class schools?

**Megan:** Not really, like, a lot of my friends are—I don't know. Well, okay, most people I hang out with, like, I'm not really friends with—this sounds bad—any poor people. But that's not because I'm not friends with people who are poor. It's just that just happens to be who I'm friends with.

We thought this comment suggested a commitment to holding on to these social distinctions, but Megan did not welcome our pushing her on this point. But there is no confident ascription here of herself or others to one or another social class status, and the same was the case when we asked about the importance of ethnicity. Indeed, when we next asked whether the mix of backgrounds at the school was problematic, Megan was glad to explicate the democratic vision of the whole class: “No, I don’t really think that's an issue, like, because we all go to the same school, so we're not that different. . . . It's not like we're going to have fights: ‘You're not as rich as me. I don't like you.’ So I don't think it matters. I think it's good because you can always meet someone who's, like, different to you.” Shane, whose family was not well-off, was more
willing to have a go at explaining how social class divides the students: “In our year, we’ve got the posh people. There’s the people that play pat ball, football, and the people that chat about rubbish.”

Shane had no trouble naming “the posh people” but found it hard to explain why they merited such a label: “They’re not posh, but we just call them posh, I don’t know why.” Although it may not have been obvious from his initial classification, Shane was not keen on those who “play pat ball,” preferring those who play football or “chat about rubbish.” He qualified this by saying, “Not chat about rubbish but, like, the people, like, always having a laugh—so me, Nick, Gideon.” Along with Fesse, these boys are less culturally or economically privileged than the middle-class boys in the core group, but they have all found a way of rubbing along together, a mode of connection founded on mutual interests in football and computer games, along with a readiness for jokey banter.

Shane anchored his account with an analysis also of those on the edge: “Sedat just hangs out with the pat ball people, but he don’t play it. Max, he’s just kind of everything. He will never hang around with me—he’s not my cup of tea—but I think he’s posh. . . . And then we’ve got Giselle: she’s the same as like Sergei and everyone”—by which he refers to Giselle’s and Sergei’s status as semioutsiders. From what we observed, he was not far wrong: those who were ready to “have a laugh” could find their way toward the center of the network irrespective of socioeconomic status, while those who cultivated an outsider status, for whatever reason, were not comfortably in the center, even if they were middle class (Giselle, Max, and to some extent Sebastian).

Varieties of Connection

While being together in the class is valued by the school as deliberately “democratic,” and while everyone was civil at school and “friends” on Facebook, not all forms of association were so open. For out-of-school activities of importance to them, the young people sought to manage inclusion and exclusion carefully. To be sure, the students had been dealt certain cards: the composition of individuals in this class, the locale they live in, the expectations of their family. The school, as is common, draws its catchment across an area bifurcated by major road and rail links that divide richer and poorer families. Yet in principle they have
considerable freedom in how they play these cards: whom they hang out with, ask for homework help from, share intimacies with.

The whole-class network was constructed from the 26 young people's answers to eight questions. When we generated networks for each of these separately, the overall groupings discussed earlier held up fairly well. For instance, asked “Who do you hang out with?” the core group remained densely connected, but the girls on the edge split up, naming others beyond the class. The other boys, however, remained more connected via football or computer games. Indeed, the network based on doing out-of-school activities was particularly the preserve of the boys, being heavily sports related.

The network was similar for the question “Who is a close friend?” although in relation to this question, the girls on the edge were fairly strongly interconnected. To those who suspect boys mainly hang out in groups, the network belies this, as the core group of boys and those on the periphery variously claimed close friendships with each other. But this age group seemed not to rely on even those whom they called their close friends when they needed help or advice; instead, as we learned from the individual interviews, young people turned to parents, older siblings, or just one or two other friends for this.

Asking for help with homework revealed the densest network of all (apart from being Facebook friends). The class held strongly together through its shared school tasks rather than as an autonomous social or interest-led unit. But the homework network nonetheless resembled that based on sociability (hanging out, doing aft er-school activities, etc.). In other words, the young people tended to ask questions about their friends' homework rather than asking those who may be best able to answer them. This is fine if your friends know the answers but may disadvantage those who are less sociable or those whose friends do not know the answers. The notable exception was the “gift ed and tal-ented” girls, who were, in the homework network only, among the most densely interconnected, presumably because they would be the most useful. Even so, it was the core group (most of whom were middle class) that turned to them for homework help.

Did these networks also exist online? The question “Who do you chat with by text, Facebook, BBM, or MSN?” revealed that the core group had the liveliest digital connections. The clique was equally well con-
nected online, and so, too, were the girls on the periphery of the class network. The “gifted and talented” girls, by contrast, appeared cut off from the class, as did the boys on the periphery of the network. The boys at the edge were less connected to each other online than offline.

In the digital age, we might expect an offline network also to exist online, and in the case of the class, it did. Within the class, almost everyone had a Facebook link to everyone else, and this mirrored their patterns of face-to-face communication. Since, as Megan put it, “everyone” is on Facebook, the result is both an inclusive and a diverse site of social interaction. For instance, Lydia, a rather sad outsider at school, could chat on Facebook with others in the class and also, for escape, with “different sorts of people,” while also maintaining multiple Twitter accounts with different names for interactions that were invisible to her classmates. But being “constantly connected” or “always on” should not be seen as more significant than it is. Simply keeping Facebook open and occasionally posting a “What’s up” comment ensured mutual availability with low commitment—more like leaving the door open or a light on than announcing a desire for deep interaction at all times. As Fesse said, “It’s sort of on like randomly.” Dom agreed: “I usually go on it to see what’s happening. I don’t really chat to people because it’s kind of—I can’t really be arsed.”

The network interconnecting members of the class—the structure of the grouping of “the class”—was just one of several other networks that enmeshed the students’ lives with those of others. To identify these other networks, we asked each student to draw his or her “ego network.” As for the whole-class networks, this exercise was undertaken in private at home. On a blank page, each young person wrote his or her name in the center and put the names of people important to them all around. We prompted with similar questions to those asked in the whole-class network, following up as appropriate. The answers helped us to understand how the seemingly equivalent links in the network had very different qualities. We examine three groupings in more depth in the following sections.

The Core Group

The closest bonding in the class stemmed from the boys’ activity-based groupings—mainly playing football and computer games both at school
and on the weekends, with others from the class, the year group, and other schools. By contrast, the girls tended to pair up. As Adriana explained, “There’s me and Megan, . . . Salma and Abby, Giselle and Sara, Lydia and . . . And then the boys are together.” The boys did not disagree with this analysis: “Boys don’t really have close friends. Like, it’s girls that have close friends. Boys kind of all go together,” Gideon told us. Yet, as noted earlier, in the boys’ private answers to the social network task, they did claim close friendships, so hanging out as a group seems more a matter of performing masculinity. Furthermore, Adriana did not mean her analysis in a derogatory way. As she explained, “Apart from Megan, the only person I talk to is the boys.” Megan agreed, although she was keen to subdivide the boys into those who, at the age of 13, could speak to girls and those who could not.

In the whole-class network, the boys at the center were all highly social and good at sustaining links with others. Online, too, the core grouping was still central—Dom went on Facebook most days; his wall was full of interaction with others in the core group, along with jokey rude comments, funny pictures, and news about sports. Nick was among the most flirtatious of the boys (his profile showed him posing with a girlfriend and making sexual jokes).

In some ways, the core group comprised an aggregate of previously constructed pairs or small group bonds developed via proximity in the neighborhood (see later in this chapter). Jamie lived near and was friends with Dom. Dom, Nick, Shane, and Fesse were bound together through playing football, the first two in an out-of-school club and all four of them at break times and for the school team. While Sebastian had considerable interpersonal strengths and was comfortable talking with girls and clearly enjoyed jokey banter, we did not see Adam engaging so obviously in this milieu, and his place in this network surprised us slightly—most likely his enthusiasm for computer games, shared by most of the boys, was key to the explanation. All the members of this group, bar Adam, were often seen as part of an even larger peer group that seemed mainly to revolve around the football team—we saw them congregating at the same spot in the playground and often hanging around by the local shops after school.

Connections through computer gaming is complicated by incompatible console systems. Sony PlayStation 3 and Xbox users can only enter
the same game world with others playing the same system. For this reason, Nick had ensured that his Xbox friendship group overlapped between his virtual game friends and the real people who were important to him. As we recorded in our field notes,

He showed me his live friend community, and this has very strong cross-over with his real-world, and especially school-based friendship groupings. He is thus only likely to buy and play games, which allow him to interact within this community. We spent a lot of time talking about how he would chat with his friends and also the relationship between gameplay and in school talk. There is a very clear sense how shared gaming experiences provide the material for real-life talk. He also talked about how he hypothesises the minds, attitudes and pleasures of his virtual opponents/collaborators. This part of the discussion was very interesting as he clearly projects frustrations, competitiveness and pleasures onto his friends.

Adam, perhaps the keenest gamer in the class (see chapters 7 and 8), struggled to sustain such an overlap, as his classmates lacked the expertise he shared with those with whom he met up online, some of whom he knew from his previous school. So, with purely online “friends,” the in-game conversation is much more interesting because, Adam said, you can “talk about the game while you’re playing it”; but “there wouldn’t really be anything [else] to talk about, like, between us because nothing would have happened except for playing games with them.” Paradoxically, the very fact that his in-game friends knew nothing about the rest of his life made him feel free: “Well, you can be more confident, because they don’t know who—in a way they don’t really know who you really are. . . . You could just let yourself out to them. . . . You can just act with them however you want because they don’t really know.” We explore further the ways that online networks extend the possibilities for identity and expression in chapter 4. What this section has shown is that it took focused social effort to sustain a position in the large “core” group. What can be expressed among the popular group is highly restricted, so being in the center is at once conformist (acknowledging contributions, accepting those who are a little different from oneself, keeping up a level of chat and friendliness) and edgy (making rude jokes, flirting, sharing political links, or swearing excessively). Since
the class had more boys than girls, this central position was anchored around football and computer games. There was also a lot of critical talk about the school—unfair rules, annoying teachers, acts of minor resistance—that perhaps communicated social confidence as much as irritation with school. In other classes, matters might be different, but whatever the social “glue,” fitting in requires effort and a certain kind of social know-how.  

The Clique

The friendship clique of Max, Alice, and Jenna seemed anomalous in terms of gender, class, and ethnicity, and we were able to investigate this on one of the many occasions when they hung out in Alice’s house: “Everyone just comes to my house. Like, I have never been to Max’s house, and I, like, rarely go to Jenna’s house. We just come to my house.” What emerged from this Sunday afternoon in the summer holidays, helped by a generous order of pizza and soda, was an understanding of how the clique has created its own small social world, full of wit and critical observation, closely shared between them, and shutting out where each of them comes from. Max rather uncomfortably split his time between his mother’s and father’s houses; Alice had a strong sense of being second to her “practically perfect” older sister and high-achieving parents; and Jenna lived in an overcrowded house with three sisters to a tiny bedroom and a mother she found it difficult to communicate with sleeping in the living room.

The afternoon developed a life of its own when the clique began to discuss its shared love of Harry Potter and The Hunger Games. As true fans, they had lined up to get the books first, read them over and over, seen the films, read the online commentary, and played the computer game:

Alice: Yes, we all read The Hunger Games series.
Max: Yes, but we read it first, before it was mainstream.
Alice: Yes, we read it, like . . .
Max: Before all the hipsters came and stole it.
Interviewer: Okay.
Alice: We read it, like, before it came out.
Interviewer: And before the film, basically.
Alice: Yes, way before the film.
Max: Way before the film.

As we waited for the pizza, they compared the school houses in *Harry Potter*. Having stated several times that Hufflepuff is the house for “losers,” Alice revealed that this was where the online game Pottermore had put her. Max was in Ravenclaw, for “the clever people”; Jenna was in Slytherin, which is “cool.” The next excitement was for Pottermore to classify the researcher (in this case, Sonia), who, to Alice’s delight, was put in Hufflepuff. This social situation offered a seemingly typical opportunity to display shared knowledge and to assert membership of the group as a true fan. They keenly drew on their knowledge of J. K. Rowling’s commentary on her own books, along with a careful reading of the texts, for example, debating their interpretations to work out whether Dumbledore had killed Grindelwald.

Their social world—participated in by many young people globally—was clearly revealed as we discussed how the books’ young heroes saved themselves and others from a threatening world or as we indulged in imaginative play: Could Harry and Hermione fall in love? Is Dumbledore gay? Beyond the proud display of fan expertise and the fun of unpicking the plots, there was a lot of talk about emotions: films that made them cry, fighting with their siblings, angry family arguments. We felt, too, that Max and Jenna enjoyed the busy domestic scene at Alice’s house—noisy, messy, yet loving; full of photos, shared meals, and lively talk. Alice described how everyone in her family took turns cooking, leading Max to comment, “You’re so lucky because I don’t get a turn to cook ever. . . . My parents never let me in the kitchen.” However, when we visited his house, Max had just made biscuits with his mother, and they talked about making cakes too; so his comment suggests a certain amount of positioning himself as an outsider. Jenna added that they got a lot of take-out food in her house.

Facebook revealed yet further connections and disconnections. On Facebook, the clique took their profile names from *The Hunger Games*, while a number of their friends appear to study at Hogwarts School. Their online chat with each other echoed the rude repartee of face-to-face interaction among the friends at home, rarely visible at school or to anybody else. But their Facebook profiles also conformed to the
norm whereby the two girls, but not Max, could be seen to be friends. Moreover, while Max displayed his fan preferences in his profile, Alice’s participation in the clique was hidden online; instead, she represented herself as a fun-loving girl from a happy family who looks after little children and has plenty of friends (even though that identity contrasted with her persona at school). By contrast, Max and Jenna showed little or nothing of family life on their profiles, constructing Facebook as a peer-only domain. This reflects a threefold contrast between the presentation of self at school, at home, and online, which each of the three clique members managed differently. At school, Max frequently seemed bored or withdrawn, sassing his teachers or gazing out the window, unlike in the clique, and we never saw Jenna displaying as much knowledge or enthusiasm at school as she did when discussing Harry Potter in the clique. Yet the clique was hidden from conventional displays of friendship especially on Facebook, as we explore in more detail in chapter 4. In short, these three young people’s intense social world together, while not positively disguised, is not especially visible either in social interactions at school or online—for in different ways, these are both kinds of public spaces, and the clique came alive when alone together in a unique configuration of friendship and mutual interest.25

The Networks of Migration

Every child in the class was linked to networks that had little connection to life at school, and these came primarily through his or her family. But for those from minority ethnic backgrounds (which in themselves varied considerably; see the appendix), these linkages were not merely to cousins or grandparents or friends of the family but to more far-flung relatives, even to a distinct culture very different from that on offer at school.26

Mark was a quiet, serious boy at school, always ready to put his hand up, who achieved good grades and was the class representative on the school council. He was not on Facebook at the beginning of the year we spent with the young people, although he harbored ambitions of being more involved in football at school. He drew a smallish ego network of school friends and immediate family, also including the young people
who lived in his block of flats—with whom he played football in the nearby park and computer games at home—and, especially, the two families who had emigrated from the same East African country about the same time as his family and with whom his parents got together every second weekend.

Sedat and his family socialized exclusively with other migrant Turkish families; he spent time out of school with people he called cousins and at school with those who spoke Turkish. He went boxing with other Turkish boys who lived locally and also with extended cousins who seemed to travel over to his house to go to the local club, which was also run by young Turkish men. When we went to his house, his mother seemed to be feeding another young Turkish boy from school in what we took to be an extended form of community-based care. His experiences at a saz school (see chapter 9) and his meeting of the people there were completely facilitated by his family. Indeed, for Sedat and Hakim, their membership in the Turkish community made the class seem a secondary form of social organization in their lives.
Language mattered a lot. Sedat and Hakim had both migrated to the UK and very much operated with English as a second language: Turkish was spoken at home. Indeed, all the Turkish boys at the school were operating with English as a second language—unlike many of the other young people from other migrant backgrounds who were more strictly bilingual. Not only did this more restricted use of English impact adversely on their academic performance, but it also ensured that social and interpersonal relationships revolved around Turkish-speaking experiences. Sedat particularly used Turkish in and around the school as a way of creating solidarity and excluding others from his peer group, even drawing a young Turkish-speaking teacher into his repartee. Whereas we saw few relationships that crossed age boundaries for most members of the class, the Turkish boys were much more connected through their membership in this community rather than the narrow boundaries imposed by age-defined membership in the class or the year group.

The friendship among Hakim, Yusuf, Mark, and Sedat seemed unaffected by the fact that Mark and Hakim were not on Facebook (or other electronic media except occasional texts). Being friends for them seemed to be largely a matter of being in the same class, anchored by the fact that Hakim, Yusuf, and Mark also walked to school together, keeping each other company on the journey to the more middle-class neighborhood where the school is located.

The nature of migration patterns and the sheer variety of migrant communities in the locale meant that the young people’s sense of belonging to out-of-school networks varied in form and significance. The Turkish community we have just described frequently moved backward and forward between the UK and “home,” also encompassing, in Sedat’s case, family members who had moved to Germany. Sedat spoke very positively about the small town, with its rural economy, where his grandparents lived and saw his future as much in Turkey as in the UK. However, for Mark and Yusuf, whose families had escaped conflict, “home” was now clearly the UK, and while their families held on to pre-immigration forms of social behavior, the young people saw this more as a background rather than the future. A third group of young people still moved between the country of origin and the UK, emphasizing family connections but not necessarily current peer points of reference. Salma saw her relatives in Pakistan over the summer, and her mother
subsequently arranged Skype calls for them to stay in touch; but, she said, “it was better when you were there though.” Yusuf’s mother used Skype to connect with relatives who were now in Canada, and he, too, visited them over the holiday period.

Fesse, likewise, had been back to East Africa to see relatives over the summer, as had Jenna. However, for these young people, at least at this age, there was a sense of mediating two parallel social worlds, rather than, as in Sedat’s case, integrating them. For Deyan, who had recently arrived in the UK, Facebook was in his home language (Sedat’s was in both English and Turkish) and thus seemed to keep open connections beyond the social world of the school.

Several of the middle-class students had parents from other European countries, and they seemed to find the maintenance of two parallel social networks hard work. Adam talked about being bored staying with his grandparents back in Germany, although he was proud of his ability to speak German. Adriana, who had a strong circle of people in school, had learned to cope with having to spend a lot of time with relatives in Spain but talked of it being difficult to sustain the same depth of relationships all the time—hence her rather wistful descriptions of spending time cooking with her grandmother back in Madrid.

But neither Adriana nor Adam used networked technologies to stay in touch with family abroad. Indeed, often this role was left to mothers. Deyan’s mother used Skype daily to contact her family abroad, back home in Bulgaria, and Jamie’s mother, coming from New Zealand, maintained a “family Facebook”: “so we put things on, pictures and things like that so we can post to each other and we can see it within the family.” Many of these families also subscribed to television services from “home,” which were often playing when we went to visit. Nick kept Skype open for his grandmother, suggesting the potential of connected copresence likely to be more common in the future.

Home, Family, and Locale

Much has been said about members of the “digital generation” being so focused on their peer group as to neglect their family, but this was not the case for the class. Generally, the ego networks were filled with friends from school and family almost in equal measure. Figure 3.3
offers a simple overview of the ego networks, showing the approximate number of people that each class member identified as important to him or her from within the school and from outside it. The numbers should be taken as just a guide, but even so, the patterns are revealing.

First, some members of the class have more populated ego networks than others do: Gideon identified the most people in his; Joel and Yusuf had the fewest. Second, we can see that Dilruba’s ego network was strongly focused on family and friends from out of school, while Nick’s was strongly focused on people in school. Then we see a spread, rather than any generalized pattern or clear groupings with a balance of in- and out-of-school contacts. Further, at least in this small dataset, we cannot discern any obvious patterns by gender, socioeconomic status, or ethnicity, which suggests that “important” people are a matter of personal choice transcending such conventional social boundaries.
If we were to look more closely into the class members’ out-of-school contacts, we would find further differences in the balance between family and other people, whether children or adults. But for all the young people, family was a primary and defining social resource, as we explore further in chapters 7 and 8. To be sure, family life had its problems, and even the meaning of “family” varied: for some, this meant the nuclear family, while for others, the extended family was also significant. Sara’s ego network showed a relatively small social world divided into her nuclear family and her close friends, with online connections among the friends but not the family. Adriana—who liked to play the bad girl at school—drew a reassuring daisy-like image, with herself in the center, surrounded by her family and friends all mixed together. Jenna named her three sisters as her close friends in addition to members of the clique and a few others. Virtually all the young people named members of their close family as somebody they would turn to if they had a problem.

In public discussions about youth, the difficulties of young people’s meeting up face-to-face—because of parental fears for their safety, the cost of public transport, the lack of bicycle lanes or affordable places to meet up—is seldom mentioned. Yet it is clear from the fieldwork that everyday physical colocation is still the primary means of constructing friendship circles, maintaining family connections, and exploring wider networks, each of which opens up different forms of social organization. Who from the class lives nearby really mattered. We found the young people’s social worlds to be heavily local, with unsupervised movement about or beyond the neighborhood being fairly rare. Megan said, “Sebastian lives, like, round the corner to me and Dominic and Jamie, so we’ll, like, usually meet, like, either in the park or [nearby shops]. So sometimes I’ll, like—usually I’ll meet up with [my two best friends]. They’ll come to my house, or I’ll go to their house. And then we go and meet up with them. . . . And then we’ll go to someone’s house or go to the park.” Indeed, the young people spent most of their time within a few miles of their home and school—the boys playing football or generally hanging out locally, the girls meeting up with best friends or walking to school together, possibly being more supervised. As Dilruba said, “I can’t just walk out the house, no, but yes, I can just go to my friend’s house.” Mark’s father explicitly linked the restrictions on young
people’s movement in their locale with their enthusiasm for social networking sites. In his own childhood in Africa, he reflected, “The village is open for everyone. You go in everybody’s house, and you—in the morning, you go out, out in the field, play for 12 hours up in the mountains or somewhere, up, a suburb of the city, and it’s like an adventure.” But today, in the cosmopolitan city, his son’s adventures are “confined within the room, which is very sad.” Yet online, he added, “they are now way beyond sometimes, beyond our comprehension. They have this connection. They do online talk and play with other people as they might even—may not know, but he—they say that it’s their friends, actually. They talk and they play with them, and it’s going far sometimes.”

Even though members of the class participated in other networks beyond the school and home—sports clubs, culturally based institutions and activities, computer gaming—it was striking how often parents mediated these and, thereby, influenced which might flourish. Parents were important in transporting their children to and fro. Jamie, who played tennis competitively twice a week and additionally in tournaments at weekends, was ferried about by his mother. Sara went climbing with her father on Saturdays. Dom and Nick attended the local football club, but Dom needed his parents to take him to cricket matches in the summer. Perhaps because of parental fears about the risks of city living, independent travel seemed to need a rationale—as an organized activity, undertaken in company. Sebastian now took the bus to his drama club, although it was his mother who as an adult participant had introduced him to the club.

Despite living in the suburb of a major city, only rarely did any member of the class actually travel into the city center, even accompanied by parents, although visits to local shopping centers were undertaken with close friends. The most independent person in the class was Shane, who talked enthusiastically about being off on his bike, making friends in parks or football fields across the wider neighborhood, although he was still tethered through his mobile phone:

It’s like you see all kids on the street just looking at you like cautious, but when I’m day off, I feel peaceful. I can do my own thing, play football, do whatever I want, and I know what’s bothering me like. I even know, like, the residents there now. Nick’s mum always says, “Hi.” People that I see
there in the park go, “all right?” and I’m like, “Yes, how are you?” “Fine.” Even some, like there’s these days where it’s a hot day, and loads of people come out from around that area. And here are all these little kids. I even muck around with the little kids, playing football with them.

Shane effectively conveyed an image of predigital childhood that, for many adults, is strongly nostalgic—this is how life was before the anxieties of the risk society restricted children to their media-rich bedrooms.36 Indeed, as fewer and fewer children share in Shane’s freedom, the role of family in scaffolding connections beyond the tight constraints of immediate locality becomes increasingly important.

Conclusions

This chapter has used social network analysis to open up some of the ways of relating and belonging that shaped the young people’s relations within and beyond the class. It has revealed a series of interconnecting yet discrete networks that make up the young people’s social worlds. It has also revealed how boundaries between places and social relations were constructed. One key border was between school and home. Some teachers seemed to find the students’ lives out of school somewhat unreal: what, they asked us in tones of curious incredulity, were we finding about life “outside” or online? Or, as one teacher speculated to us about how he imagined the students spent their lives, “You see them at the bus stop on their phones. It’s all meaningless social networking,” adding in slightly comical fashion, “It’s not as if they’re on Wikipedia learning anything.” The parents, similarly, saw little of their children’s friendships, knowing only friends whom they were told about or who were brought home to meet them. Even the class teacher, Catherine, could say little about their lives outside the class: she thought the clique members Alice and Jenna might be friends out of school, but she was not sure; she thought Shane was probably a loner outside school because he seemed on the edge of things in the class. As we have seen, Alice, Jenna, Shane, and the others had rather different stories to tell.

We pursue in later chapters whether there are costs to these attempts at controlling such boundaries—that in effect they exacerbate disconnections across domains and thus within young people’s lives. What we
have seen here is that the young people themselves tried to control access to the different parts of their lives. For instance, we saw how the clique created stronger barriers than connections between home and school, and offline and online, and we saw in other cases that what was visible at school or to parents or even to peers was carefully managed by the young people as they moved from place to place. In other chapters, we examine such disconnections more closely, to discover how identities and behaviors did not travel between home and school.

One conclusion from this chapter, with its construction and then deconstruction of the whole-class network, is that adults’ fascination with the imaginary of “the class” as a coherent “small lifeworld” is significantly misplaced. In itself, it may reflect a nostalgia for a time when our social worlds had more distinct territories, shared values, high self-sufficiency, and a preordained place in the community—all of which Benita Luckmann argues to have been characteristic of premodern societies. But from the young people’s perspectives, their experiences of being in the class were contingent, impermanent. For sure, “the class” offered each student a meaningful learner and social role—as central or peripheral, popular or esoteric, majority or minority, and so forth. Further, the unit of the class was meaningful precisely because it brought such different kinds of people together; as a study of social relations in UK secondary schools found, culturally diverse schooling can support the development of positive attitudes to ethnic diversity among the students. For this reason, in chapter 5, we examine the possible tensions between commonality and difference, as this was played out in daily life, to reveal how the school sought to construct its own version of a civil society. On the other hand, this chapter has also shown how sources of difference lie just beneath the surface; and these became all the more important when students left the school grounds.

This finding leads us to suggest that claims about the individualizing effects of the network society should not underplay the importance of spatially located social worlds structured by gender, ethnicity, and social class. Over and again in this book, we will see how these define and constrain young people’s relationships in their choices of friendship. This, in turn, leads us to question the widely influential claim that traditional social structures are giving way to networked individualism in the digital age. Barry Wellman and Lee Rainie argue,
In generations past, people usually had small, tight social networks . . . where a few important family members, close friends, neighbors, and community groups . . . constituted the safety net and support system for individuals. This new world of networked individualism is oriented around looser, more fragmented networks that provide on-demand succor . . . The revolutionary social change from small groups to broader personal networks has been powerfully advanced by the widespread use of the internet and mobile phones.39

Yet it is Wellman and Rainie’s characterization of times past more than that of networked individualism that captures rather well the ordinary lives of the class today.40 It is not that “the class” is itself the most important unit for the young people, but it is a key point of intersection, where their few small worlds become connected or disconnected in ways that matter. And we certainly did not see that each young person enjoyed the benefits of a “looser” and “broader” but highly “personal” or individualized network. Rather, they were embedded, more or less securely, within rather tight networks—experienced as coherent small worlds—centered on home, school, locale, and diaspora. But this is not to suggest that nothing has changed over recent decades. The young people's small social worlds were not simply those of traditional British society. Rather, they were profoundly rewritten by the effects of globalization, as shown by the mix of ethnicities and affluence represented in the class. Connections with diverse diasporas alter the geography of social relations, linking children to particular communities or subcultures in their locale as well as to relations in their country of origin.41

What, then, of modern notions of connection and “connectivity”?42 Our observation that digital networks underpinned most of the social networks in the class is clearly a 21st-century phenomenon. These tended to reinforce relations of popularity and peripherality, permitting the class members to display certain kinds of public identity to each other as a class, while also facilitating other kinds of identity exploration away from the group. This leads us to wonder whether the shared space of Facebook, taking in nearly the whole class, rendered the few “outsiders” even more isolated. Or did such a space of visibility enable some to join in (and be seen to join in, however “weak” the ties) when previously they may have lacked any ready means of doing so?43 Such questions
are taken up in chapter 4. We have seen here that engaging in online networks strengthens and to some degree extends young people’s connections. Yet our analysis of the ego networks drawn up by class members suggests that it did not especially increase the diversity or deepen the quality of their relationships. Rather, online communication seemed to reinforce (rather than undermine) the importance of relationships with family and local friends built primarily through face-to-face communication. To develop this insight further, we next turn to the young people’s own accounts of identity formation within and through their offline and online relations with peers.