

LEARNING IN THE DIGITAL ERA. DIGITAL CITIZENS

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Abstract: The paper focuses on learning in the digital era and digital citizens. The evolution of modern information technologies and the Internet have revolutionized education and traditional forms of training. The development of modern forms of learning has directed the evolution of multimedia and communication technologies to the development of digital infrastructures demanded by today's computerized societies that provide everyone with easy access to the content of massive virtual libraries. Using new technologies, everyone concerned with their professional development can communicate with their field specialists and other colleagues to share information, knowledge and experience. Digital citizens belong to the digital society. They use technology to get involved in the good course of society. Digital citizenship empowers people to harvest the benefits of digital technology in a safe and efficient way. In the world of the 21st century, the skills of the digital age cannot be neglected. Once these skills are mastered, trust and autonomy arise. Young people learn not only to master a wide range of digital tools but also to understand how they work and how they are created.

Keywords: Digital era, digital citizens, eTwinning, information communication technology, e-learning

1. Introduction

The evolution of modern information technologies and the Internet have revolutionized education and traditional forms of training, reorganizing and transforming them so as to provide the opportunity for all those concerned with their level of professional training, regardless of age, gender or geographical area. The development of modern forms of learning has directed the evolution of multimedia and communication technologies to the development of digital infrastructures demanded by today's computerized societies that provide everyone with easy access to the content of massive virtual libraries of electronic learning courses and materials that, can be viewed and/or remotely listed in any corner of the world. Using new technologies, everyone concerned with their professional development can communicate with their field specialists and other colleagues to share information, knowledge and experience.

The development of modern learning technologies has led to developments in education and training programs in today's society, leading inevitably to open distance learning and distance learning programs for company staff and beyond. Practically, distance learning is the most convenient, flexible, and cheapest way for adult busy learners to study anywhere, anytime, without being present in the classroom and without being directly supervised by a teacher or a specialist instructor. Developing modern learning technologies has created conditions for lifelong learning, mainly driven by the dynamic nature of areas of activity such as medicine, law and finance, areas for which continuing education is mandatory, not an option. In the face of a growing international competition, many countries are developing strategies for reshaping human resources

based on lifelong learning systems as an essential policy for maintaining the advantage in global competition.

Lifelong learning is not only an aspect of vocational education and training, but it becomes a fundamental principle of the active participation of the individual in society throughout his life. Adult training is found in the content of all programs aimed at relaunching the economies of many countries. It aims at transforming the current system of vocational training institutions, completing it with the necessary components for anticipating and achieving the professional reorientation and the early preparation of the workforce for activities using new technologies, innovation and high professionalism.

“Information communication technology (ICT) is the most effective way to develop basic training and skills in the various fields needed in a global knowledge-based economy”.(Centea, 2013, p.58) In this context, the development and implementation of e-learning technologies is considered a useful strategy in transforming and modernizing the system.

The e-learning environment is practically a virtual education environment that uses digital technology and the Internet to provide all those concerned with their professional development with a range of teaching, learning, evaluation and communication tools. From a pedagogical point of view, the e-learning environment is a teaching, learning and evaluation method based on digital communication and multimedia technology, which ensures the rapid transfer of information, knowledge, including understanding techniques and ways of interpreting them, anywhere, anytime in order to achieve rapid performance results, thus accelerating the educational process.

In terms of content, the e-learning environment consists of a distributed knowledge base, on-line support, and digital-assisted training. The knowledge database is the most accessible virtual library and bookstore that provides a wide range of theoretical knowledge of all fields of activity, individually or through organized training programs, free of charge or surcharge to all those interested in their professional development. On-line support designates information and communication technology that allows e-learning users to talk to each other to exchange knowledge or information, asking questions and receiving answers, even immediately. The training methods used are determined by the technical means of communication that support the electronic learning process, which can be synchronous or asynchronous, as they can or cannot give those interested the opportunity to participate simultaneously in the learning process.

From a functional point of view, the e-learning environment consists of the e-learning platform, e-learning resources (all data of interest in the e-learning environment, knowledge and information) and users (those who use e-learning resources - students, teachers, tutors and administrators). “From a technological point of view, the e-learning environment represents the technology of supporting the teaching and learning process”.(Creeber, Martin 2013, p.98) It represents the technical support of a training process that allows the development of complex, easy-to-use learning resources, using techniques and methods to eliminate the specific problems of students enrolled in different forms of education, each with its own specificity.

2. Developing active citizenship through eTwinning

The digital transition transforms almost all the aspects of our lives at a pace that is hard to keep up. Everyone - workers, pupils, citizens - must acquire the new skills and competences needed to take advantage of the opportunities that open up to us. Besides the fact that almost all professions involve digital competences, almost everyone needs a basic level of these skills to live, learn, communicate and participate in society. Education has a fundamental role here. We want young Europeans to have the right skills to enter and work in the labor market, but we also want to be independent, involved citizens. This means that, in addition to facilitating their digital literacy efforts, we have a duty to make sure they have a moral compass at hand when navigating the online universe. Translating fundamental values such as freedom, democracy, dignity and respect for others, we will prepare them for a life characterized by a safe, adequate and responsible behavior. Thus, they will be able to interact online with authorities, businesses and the community in a productive and mutually beneficial manner.

Given that digital technology is a reality that today dictates the course of people's lives, the awareness and sensitivity of the young generation are the only ones that will play a key role in recognizing its positive and useful aspects. Based on this solid foundation, digital technology has the force to transform our democracy. At a time when the legitimacy deficit grows at all levels, where citizens seem increasingly detached from traditional democratic processes, the rational use of digital technology has the potential to reinvigorate citizens' relations with neighbors and authorities. "Developing digital citizenship is therefore essential for young people to be able to participate in online society by using digital means to fulfill their civic duty and to make the most of the potential of technology".(Gere 2015, p.28)

This is how we achieve eTwinning and the important role it plays in helping young people build their digital skills and in promoting fundamental values and citizenship in the classroom. E-Twinning - The Community for Schools in Europe - is an action for schools funded by the European Commission under the Erasmus + program. ETwinning is one of the main tools to promote inclusive education and common values. "ETwinning is the gateway to teachers in the world of innovative teaching and learning".(www.eTwinning.net) By creating their own digital competences, teachers become more sophisticated digital citizens, which is reflected in didactic work. Thanks to the exchange of experience, training and projects, eTwinning teachers and, through them, students form digital literacy skills that they will use throughout their lives.

Direct contact between people is essential to developing mutual respect and intercultural tolerance. Teachers are well positioned to detect and counteract early signs of radicalization. ETwinning projects allow teachers and students facing similar problems to share experiences and learn from each other. ETwinning is a strong learning experience, offering students the opportunity to participate in collaborative learning projects. ETwinning offers a high level of support for its users. In each of the participating countries (currently 38), the National Support Service (NSS) promotes action, provides advice and guidance to end users and organizes a range of activities and professional development opportunities at national level. At European level, eTwinning is coordinated by the Central Support Service (CSS) managed by European Schoolnet, a consortium of 30 Ministries of Education. ETwinning incorporates a sophisticated digital platform that has both public and private areas and is available in 28 languages. The public area www.eTwinning.net offers browsing visitors and a range of information on how to get

involved in eTwinning; explaining the benefits the action offers and provides inspiration for collaborative project work. The restricted area, called eTwinning Live, is the individual teacher's interface with the community: it enables users to find each other, interact, collaborate in projects and participate in professional development activities organized at national and European level. Finally, when teachers work together, they have access to a restricted and dedicated area for the project called TwinSpace.

The screenshot shows the eTwinning website interface. At the top, there is a navigation menu with options: PORTAL, ETWINNING LIVE, GRUPURILE MELE, TWinspace-URILE MELE, ROMÂNĂ, and a button for CONECTARE SAU ÎNSCRIERE. The eTwinning logo is prominently displayed. Below the logo, there are menu items: Despre, Proiecte, Recunoaștere, Dezvoltare profesională, and Accente. A search icon is also present. The main content area features a video player with the title 'European eTwinning Prizes Winning Project - Imagine Together for the World' and a play button. To the right of the video, there is a text block in Romanian: 'eTwinning este comunitatea școlilor din Europa.' Below this, there is a paragraph describing the platform's purpose and a link to 'Alăturați-vă comunității eTwinning'. At the bottom, there are three statistics: 628451 CADRE DIDACTICE, 201237 ȘCOLI, and 82505 PROIECTE.

2. Digital citizens in the digital society

Do you consider yourself a *digital citizen*? For some, the immediate answer would be no. However, if we stay and think about how we participate daily in the digital world (we spend daily online time, we are connected to one or more devices simultaneously, we contact colleagues, family or friends, especially by digital means) would reconsider their answer and realize that they are indeed digital citizens. What is the situation for students? We all know that young people and children today are growing up surrounded by technology. We are probably aware of the controversial notion of *digital natives* to describe "the innate ease with which young generations use technology compared to their elderly generations, which they call *digital immigrants*, referring to those who have adopted the technologies later in life". (Prensky 2010, p.64) Much has been written about this metaphor and how it distorts reality. The EU Kids Online survey, attended by 9 to 16-year-old European children, points out that talks about digital natives mask the need for children to support their digital skills development efforts.

Meanwhile, children navigate the online environment: “93% of children aged 5-15 years in the United Kingdom used the internet in 2017, with the highest incidence being in the age group of 5-7 years, with four children out of five (82%)”;(Gilster 2011, p.71) regardless of the level of digital competence or the ease (or weight) used by digital technology.

The metaphor *digital natives* is strong: it defines the digital as a country, and digital users as citizens of this country. However, it underestimates one of the most relevant aspects of this new world: the fact that there are no borders or there are very few, and there is no need for a passport and, therefore, the notions of *native* and *immigrant* do not have coverage.

In trying to define digital citizenship, three fundamental coordinates are emerging: membership, involvement and protection. Digital citizens belong to the digital society. They use technology to get involved in the good course of society. Digital citizenship empowers people to harvest the benefits of digital technology in a safe and efficient way.

Digital society offers us the opportunity to interact, learn, work and live. Citizens contribute, but also benefit from the membership in society, which applies to digital citizens as well. Most of our interactions take place online, therefore we are members of a digital society to the same extent that we are the members of the (tangible) society we live in. Everyone knows the feeling of belonging, a feeling that derives from the need to belong to an entity. This is especially true for young people, who outline their personality traits in relation to the group (and society) to which they belong.

In negotiating the rights and responsibilities that inevitably result from the notion of citizenship, we must not forget the feeling of contentment, which is the basis of the feeling of belonging. We are pleased to be part of the digital society, and our obligations to society must not shade this joy of belonging. Plenary participation in the digital society implies access. This was the first criterion used to define the digital gap, a concept that emerged in the early 1990s to explain digital inclusion discrepancies. In the last decade, digital inclusion has improved substantially, access to technology reaching almost saturation in Europe. The way people behave as members of a digital society will shape the digital environment to which we all belong.

“In Europe, 77% of citizens and 75% of children take part in online activities”.(Hafner, Miller 2017, p.15) Participating in the digital sphere is no longer a matter of having or not having, as we have seen, but rather of being able or unable. Participation in the digital environment depends on access and use, but it depends even more on attitudes. Participation may vary from simple navigation to a militant attitude. You can participate by simply browsing the net or supporting (even vocally) a cause. For a long time, digital citizens have been considered technology users (simple recipients, consumers). We see now that they can also become active participants.

Their involvement does not only translate into the consumption of digital goods and content but also in the creation of digital content, tools, applications, codes and practices. Young people are prolific digital content creators: create and share photos, videos, multimedia, texts, and opinions. The creator's hypostasis, and to a lesser extent the consumer, enables digital citizens to contribute to the digital society's landscape and better understand it. For example, when it comes to programming and its benefits to education, we always have the argument that programming allows students to create and not just to use, which is true. However, while participating in programming activities, students also learn how the digital society works. “They have the opportunity to capture

the rationale behind the algorithms underlying the search engine and other online tools that they use".(Martin 2008, p.32)

Participation in the digital environment can be described as a four step process. The first step would be those who are hidden, observing, watching, using the universal digital as consumers and spectators. Followers, those who exchange information and content, establish people-to-people links that disseminate ideas that deserve to be disseminated. On the third stage are those who create new content, practice and tools, giving rise to a new way to interact with other digital citizens and to be part of the digital society. On the fourth stage are those who exploit the potential of technology to build a better society. Lastly, we find those who want to participate in shaping the future of the Internet and those who shape the future of society as a whole with digital means. We should recognize the importance of a consistent and regular participation of young people in the discussions on Internet governance by acquiring our knowledge and skills to better understand and shape our views on the functioning of the online ecosystem. Young people can be given the means to build a better virtual space or, if they do not want to reach the highest stage, they can contribute to creating a better digital environment by promoting positive values and behaviors. At the same time, we must recognize the role of the youth in participating and interacting with society as digital citizens. For example, we all see that online petitions are referred to as civic engagement tools. "Digital tools are also used to promote transparency in decision-making, allowing citizens to rejoin new forms of organization".(Moore 2017, p.46)

Citizens are by definition protected by the country they belong to. Protection is also included among the rights that people have in the online environment. Technology means opportunities but also risks. Although risk does not necessarily involve damage, the damage can affect your ability to enjoy digital citizenship. Access to the digital environment exposes young people to possible risks, but it also stimulates their digital literacy and security skills. This means that there are great chances for active users to become technology-resistant users. Decision-makers, teachers, parents and guardians therefore need to put in place specific strategies to ensure children's right to protection without limiting their right to participate. Many young people are very clever when it comes to telling adults what they must do to be safe in the online environment, but there is no guarantee that their advice translates into changes in their own behavior. A reasonable and effective strategy would be to encourage children and young people to be responsible users not only for their own online actions but also for helping others. We also ask whether schools and parents are adequately prepared to take preventive or corrective action when the situation is degenerating. Children and young people have special needs and deserve to be protected. Just as in the real world, certain protective measures need to be established. Children and young people should be able to experience and learn from their own mistakes without being followed online. They should be encouraged to respect and protect the rights of others.

"Digital competences, the key elements of digital citizenship, are the gateway to this virtual realm".(Rowles, Brown 2017, p.102) In an increasingly digitized society, digital citizenship can be considered a right. Digital competence allows us to exercise this right. However, we should not consider digital skills merely as an ability to use the devices. We believe that tolerance and consciousness of diversity, democratic values and responsibilities are components of the skills needed to become digital citizens. In this context, education plays an essential role, being in a privileged position to outline, from an early age, the future of the connected generation. We need to develop the digital

competences of each student by providing him/her with the means to integrate into digital society with a sense of creative, responsible and safe involvement.

3. Conclusions

The main objective of the modernization effort of e-learning technology is to implement educational applications that will have greater flexibility, better reliability, a set of facilities that will ensure increased security of communication within the global Internet. The academic community, as a co-inventor and the first user of today's Internet and eLearning technology, continues to play a major role in the development of new technologies. This reduces the distance between countries in many respects, and new technologies, which are at different stages of development in the world, promise to make distances not relevant. By extending the potential of the Internet beyond the possibilities of today's technology, Internet applications will open up possibilities that we cannot imagine today. To be a genuine citizen of this country, residents must be able to position themselves in four well-defined areas. They must have: a sense of belonging; a sense of involvement; a sense of security and responsibility; a sense of confidence and autonomy.

Active digital citizens are portrayed as dynamic and involved people who use the power of this digital world to provoke, reflect and create to face the challenges they face in real situations. Active and productive digital citizens make their mark not only on the digital world but also on the physical world around us. Our society evolves and is influenced by what is happening in the digital world. However, active digital citizens do not appear overnight, as citizens of any country do not become civic spontaneously. In both cases there must be a socialization and development process.

Another aspect that emerges is the sense of genuine involvement of these young people in the topics addressed by projects such as inclusion, migration, environmental protection and political activity. In the world, whether physical or digital, there are always people standing by and observing people who are trying to change things, people animated by a sense of involvement and passive people. ETwinning facilitates the emergence of this sense of engagement, causing participants to reflect on situations that might prove complex to young participants, but which will show them what it means to contribute, to change things in the world around them. It is also clear that they acquire a sense of responsibility for their own actions in the digital environment as well as for the safety of others. "They begin to understand that in the digital landscape, messages can be manipulated, information can be misrepresented, and their identity and others can be exposed in ways they would not want". (Watson 2016, p.104)

In the world of the 21st century, the skills of the digital age cannot be neglected. Once these skills are mastered, trust and autonomy arise. Young people learn not only to master a wide range of digital tools but also to understand how they work and how they are created. They also discover how they could create other tools in the future to facilitate understanding, communication and creativity among the digital world's inhabitants. As we have already said, we can no longer distinguish between the digital world and the physical world. They are deeply woven at all levels, and what happens in one has huge effects on what happens in the other. The digital world cannot be separated from the physical world, and the attempt to separate them would create a false gap between those two.

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