

BUILDING DIGITAL CULTURE. THE POWER OF THE VIRTUAL

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Abstract: The paper focuses on the issue of digital culture. Digital culture has been defined as the right culture for the Internet age and this definition refers to the many and varied information available on the Internet that users have access to. The creation of digital content has become a necessity in the information society. The second part of the paper refers to virtual communities. Virtual communities are as real as possible and illustrate a particular culture, a culture that involves the valorisation of freedom. The next part of the paper deals with the idea of digital natives, digital literacies and digital abilities that children need to learn. A widespread idea in society is the existence of an inter-generations digital divide that makes young people born in the internet era to be digital natives, translated into a spontaneous knowledge of the use of digital technology. Digital literacy refers to the understanding and interpretation of all texts, images and video materials, whatever their level of complexity and whatever channel they are broadcast. The last part of the paper focuses on the benefits of technology use in English for Specific Purposes. Technology allows ESP learners to collaborate and engage in authentic communication in their professional discourse community, to access up-to-date information relevant to their profession, and to publish their ideas. The conclusion is that the ability to communicate unrestrictedly, to inform and express their opinions, gives citizens a good means of participating in the public debate, becoming active members of the community.

Keywords: digital culture; virtual communities; digital natives; digital literacies; technology; ESP.

1. Introduction

At the beginning of the 21st century, the development of the information society has become a global reality and necessity. It is imposed by the continuous, unprecedented and sustained development of information and telecommunication technologies, social and political changes at national, regional and international level. The creation of digital content has become a necessity in the information society. Carrying out this work in a coherent way will be one of the determining factors in the effort to make Europe the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy.

The word *digital* is used “to refer to data in the form of discrete elements. Though it could refer to almost any system, numerical, linguistic or otherwise, used to describe phenomena in discrete terms over the last 60 or so years, the word has become synonymous with technology” (Gere 2015, p. 15). Digital culture has been defined as the right culture for the Internet age and this definition refers to the many and varied information available on the Internet that users have access to. To extract the most pertinent and reliable information from databases on websites, users need to know a number of criteria to help them filter out information sources. “The last 30 years have seen both the rise of globalization and the domination of free market capitalism, the increasing ubiquity of information and communications technologies, and the burgeoning power and influence of techno-science” (Gere 2015, p. 13).

Digital culture refers, in fact, to the emergence and spread of a new means of communication. Humankind did not know too many means of communication, but each was defining and at least as important as the means of production. More specifically, humankind has lived most of its history in oral cultures, following the cultures of writing, a short period of visual culture, after which, very recently, some revolutionary technologies have fused together in a way, giving rise to some other means of communication, which we call digital. Paradoxically, we can, in a way, pursue this multimilenary history of contemporary Romania, only where all these means of communication still coexist to a certain extent.

First, oral culture. It is, of course, the product of language, still considered to be one of the defining attributes of the human in general. An oral society implies the exclusivity or at least the net primacy of speech in the communication between people. And speaking involves direct social relations, face to face, values and norms that are transmitted orally, but also customs that are reproduced from generation to generation, changing from one generation to another. In the case of Romania, oral culture was largely dominant, as the rural population still represented after the Second World War more than 75% of the total population. More specifically, in 1938, „in Romania's full cultural renaissance, illiteracy was 54%, compared with 45% in Yugoslavia, 41% in Greece and 31% in Bulgaria, compared with 6% in Hungary or 3.8% in France” (Centea 2013, p. 44). But literacy did not mean the disappearance of oral culture, and there is still a residual oral language. This is still a preference for direct, interpersonal relationships.

Contemporary digital communication technologies lead us to a new level of complexity. As they accompany a basic social behaviour (communication) that has both public and private valences, the components of this category of technological applications deeply influence the entire social space. The diversity of users and manners of use is enormous in this case, the interests involved are also very different, and restrictive interventions that do not take into account all this multiplicity of points of view is very likely to induce harmful effects. It will therefore be very difficult to determine what the standard of good use of technology from the perspective of common interest should be. “Many of the issues generated by the spread of digital technologies have their origins in the tensions that accompany major changes in mentality” (Rowles & Brown 2017, p. 39). We are talking about political, economic and social tensions, the delay with which the socially-dominated actors are reviewing their views, the poor understanding of the social relations generated by the new technologies, the inadequate interpretation of the old legal and moral norms in the new context of digital culture.

2. Virtual communities

Virtual communities are as real as possible and illustrate a particular culture, a culture that involves the valorisation of freedom. The limits of our freedom have always been disputed by moralists and lawyers. However, the nature of contemporary digital communication technologies raises new issues. Internet is an open network, making its fraudulent use relatively easy. Often, online social networking is apparently anonymous and allows the use of a false identity.

E-commerce uses faulty authentication methods that allow law breakers to make payments with the money of others without the consent of the rightful holders of electronic cards. In other cases, malicious people use inexperienced users' computers to build huge networks that act for the purposes of the controller. It is essential to note that precisely the exceptional efficiency of technology and its social importance makes total centralized control of its use impractical. Even if it were possible, it would turn out to be unproductive in the sense that the economic utility of technology would fall greatly. Instead, it would be enough for most users to have a good understanding of the technology for many of these negative effects to be neutralized. For example, if banks that use the currency to amplify and boost their transactions would consent to educate users appropriately and online businesses use safer authentication methods, the card fraud rate would drop significantly.

Public education should take up additional information and education tasks if their usefulness would be recognized by firms, authorities and individuals. Many parents who today buy computers for their children are incapable of understanding and imagining the risks a child may be exposed once he/she has full, unsecured access to the global digital network.

On the other hand, digital culture is an enormous source of knowledge and creativity. Since countless participants engage in joint cultural action, since the information is more and more abundant, the economic model based on restricting access to information or increasing the cost of information falls into disuse, being replaced by an economy of abundance. "More and more symbolic goods or intellectual instruments than those present online are free, whether they are media products, software applications, mass media, valuable academic papers, artworks, scientific data bases" (Benkler 2012, p. 50). It is possible for many to confuse cultural assets in the public domain with those in the private domain, which automatically transforms them into pirates. Some people may choose questionable cultural values and not be able to find or interpret the information they need. It is also possible for politicians, lawyers and firms not to understand the nature of these cultural transformations and to consider that the old monopolistic economic models have the same value as in the past. This generates higher adaptation costs for all participants in the new economy of symbolic goods. For example, many specialists criticize the use of software patents or copyrights, not to encourage innovation but to limit economic competition.

3. Digital natives, digital literacies

A widespread idea in society, sometimes supported by researchers, is the existence of an inter-generations digital divide that makes young people born in the internet era to be "digital natives", translated into a spontaneous knowledge of the use of digital technology, while previous generations, which are "digital immigrants", have difficulties in mastering these technologies (Prensky 2010, p. 56). The idea of the difference between generations is an old notion reflecting, mainly, the fears of adults about the accelerated pace of social and cultural change caused by technological innovation, changes that they cannot always keep up with.

There is no evidence to support the generational gap, although young people can quickly learn to use communication technologies (for example, instant messaging or

social networking sites), they are having difficulty using digital technologies creatively, as for example editing web pages, editing images, music or video.

Moreover, we cannot talk about a uniform distribution of digital competences among young people. Showing that beyond age or generation, there are a number of factors that determine digital competences (gender, level of education, Internet access and use), some authors talk about a whole "digital skills spectrum impossible to reduce dichotomically" (Watson 2016, p. 36). Digital nativity is the opportunity to access a multitude of technologies and trust in their use, linked to the possibility of multitasking and the use of the Internet as the primary means of seeking information, especially in the context of education. The diversity of Internet activities, the perception of competences as well as education are better indicators of digital nativity than age. Moreover, this strictly age-based dichotomy is not only unproductive, but can even be harmful in an educational context, for example, by the fact that:

- teachers can assume an equal knowledge of children's use of the Internet and can give tasks over the actual level of competence of some of them;
- teachers (and adults in general) consider having less digital skills in relation to children and do not give them the necessary support, although, in fact, they could speak the same language if they liked.

Livingstone considers that the term "literacy applies to the whole media and refers to the understanding and interpretation of all texts, images and video materials", whatever their level of complexity and whatever channel they are broadcast (print, electronic or digital channels) (2004, p. 12). At the same time, Livingstone points out that talking about literacy implies understanding the relationship between three processes that are culturally and historically conditioned. It is the relationship between the process of symbolic representation of knowledge, culture and values, the distribution of skills and the institutional and ideological use of competences to support social control. Applying this conceptual meaning of literacy to the digital media, we are witnessing the emergence of new questions, still unanswered. Thus, it is difficult to define the symbolic representation processes when the digital media coverage area is unclear. Also, skills and abilities do not develop independently, but are related to technology and media characteristics, being the result of interactions between the user and the media in question. The third process, the institutional use of digital competences, also provokes controversy: optimists see the path of democratization and empowerment of people in the presence of digital competences, while pessimists see another source of socio-cultural inequality in the same process.

The abilities that are most often attributed to the term digital literacy are:

- *Technical abilities*: the ability to successfully cope with spontaneous interaction with electronic infrastructure or world-specific tools in the 21st century.
- *Information abilities*: nowadays it is important to be information literate, which identifies the ability to identify whether and when information is needed, to locate it and to use it effectively. This requirement to discern information, critically analyse its relevance and, above all, to know how to find it appears as an essential part of digital literacy for many authors. Most discussions about digital competencies are concerned with the manipulation of information and neglect the cultural side of Internet use.

- *Cognitive abilities*: Thus, along with technical and informational skills, another issue that is being discussed concerns the cognitive processes that arise when electronic information is used. Digital literacy is, in Gilster's view of the book with the same title, "the ability to understand and use information in multiple formats, from a multitude of sources when presented via computer" (Gilster 2011, p. 33). Putting emphasis not only on searching for information but also on its use and advocating for the greater importance of discrimination abilities in the cognitive processing of information at the expense of technical abilities, Gilster operationalises the concept of digital literacy in four dimensions: assembling information; internet search; hypertext navigation and content evaluation. We could say that Gilster's vision is a transposition in the digital environment of the concept of critical media literacy. Digital literacy tends to be linked to life skills, not necessarily associated with formal education. Another aspect that has been taken into account in defining digital literacy is the socio-cultural dimension involved. Literacy does not reduce itself to being able to write and read, but presupposes media adequacy, meaning understanding information in any form it would be presented, that is to say, takes into account the media-information-audience triad.

According to Rowles & Brown (2017, p. 61), "literacy is a set of social practices that become relevant in the cultural context in which they manifest themselves". These practices are not static but dynamic and continually developing; they accumulate over the course of time using technology, building on existing knowledge and capabilities. Differences between users arise especially at the level of these practices, as technology is only a means to be exploited in everyday life depending on skills, cultural values and prior convictions. In an exhaustive definition of digital competences, Martin points out that these are "individuals' awareness, attitudes and ability to use digital tools and facilities to identify, access, manage, integrate, evaluate, analyse and synthesize digital resources, build and to communicate with others in everyday contexts, in order to make constructive social interactions and to reflect on these processes" (Martin 2008, p. 167).

Thus, as can be seen from the definition given by Martin (2008), being digitally competent means having the ability to successfully carry out digital actions in everyday life, be it practicing the profession, spending time or any other activities. As a result, the specific level of digital competence varies, on the one hand, depending on the life situation in which the digital media are used and, on the other hand, can be considered as a continuous change given the evolution of technology and the personal development stages of the user. Digital competence involves the acquisition and application of personal knowledge, techniques, attitudes and qualities, and the ability to plan, execute and evaluate digital actions to solve life's tasks. The digital literate user is also aware of this quality and reflects on the development of his/her own level of digital competence.

4. Digital abilities that children need to learn

Children use digital media technologies at younger ages and for longer periods of time. They spend „an average of seven hours a day in front of the screens” - from TVs and computers to mobile phones and various digital devices (Moore 2017, p. 87). This is

more than the time spent by the children with their parents or at school. As such, it can have a significant impact on their health and well-being. What digital content they consume, who they meet online, and how long they spend in front of screens - all these factors will greatly influence the overall development of children.

“The digital world is a vast extension of learning and entertainment” (Lessig 2015, p. 78). But in this digital world, children are also exposed to many risks such as cyberbullying, technology addiction, obscene and violent content, radicalization, scams and data theft. The problem lies in the rapid and ever evolving nature of the digital world, where adequate internet governance and child protection policies are difficult to recover, rendering ineffective. In addition, there is the age difference of digital users. The way children use technology is very different from adults. This gap makes it difficult for parents and educators to fully understand the risks and threats children can face online. As a result, adults may feel incapable of advising children on the safe and responsible use of digital technologies. This gap also gives rise to different perspectives on what is considered acceptable behaviour.

How can we, as parents, educators and leaders, prepare our children for the digital age? Undoubtedly, it is essential for us to equip them with digital intelligence. “Digital Intelligence or DQ is the set of social, emotional and cognitive skills that enable people to cope with challenges and adapt to the requirements of digital life” (Watson 2016, p. 24). These abilities can be fully divided into eight interconnected domains:

- Digital identity: ability to create and manage a person's identity and reputation online. This includes the public perception of the online character and the short and long term impact management of its online presence.
- Digital use: ability to use digital devices and environments, including the ability to achieve a healthy balance between online and offline life.
- Digital safety: ability to manage online risks (e.g., cyberbullying, sexual harassment, radicalization) as well as problematic content (e.g., violence and obscenity) and the ability to avoid and limit these risks.
- Digital security: ability to detect cyber threats (e.g., hacking, scams, malware), understand best practices and use appropriate data security tools.
- Digital emotional intelligence: ability to be empathetic and to build good relationships with others in the online environment.
- Digital communication: ability to communicate and collaborate with others using digital technologies and media.
- Digital abilities: ability to find, evaluate, use, distribute and create content.
- Digital rights: the ability to understand and support personal and legal rights, including privacy rights, intellectual property, freedom of speech and protection against hate speech.

Above all, the acquisition of these skills should be based on essential human values, such as respect, empathy and prudence. These values facilitate wise and responsible use of technology - an attribute that will mark future leaders. Indeed, the cultivation of digital intelligence based on human values is essential for our young people to become technology experts instead of being mastered by them.

A generation ago, the IT and digital domains were considered niche competencies. Today, they are a basic competence needed to succeed in most careers. That is why digital skills are an essential part of a comprehensive educational framework. “Without

a national digital education program, coordination and access to technology will be unevenly distributed, exacerbating inequalities and hampering socio-economic mobility” (Taylor 2013, p. 67).

The challenge for educators is to go beyond thinking by seeing IT as an instrument, or beyond the expression - *educational platforms with IT technology*. Instead, they need to think about how to develop their students' ability and confidence to excel both online and offline in a world where digital media is omnipresent. Just like IQ or EQ - which we use to measure one's general and emotional intelligence - the facility and individual command of digital media is an ability that can be measured. And the good news is that DQ is an intelligence that is very adaptive. In general, DQ can be divided into three levels:

- Level 1: Digital citizenship - ability to use digital technology and media in safe, responsible and efficient ways.
- Level 2: Digital creativity - ability to become a part of the digital ecosystem by co-creating new content and turning ideas into reality by using digital tools.
- Level 3: Digital entrepreneurship - ability to use digital environments and technologies to address global challenges or create new opportunities.

Of the three, digital creativity is the least neglected, as more and more schools are trying to give children a certain exposure to media literacy, coding and even robotics, all of which are considered to be directly related to future employment and job creation. Digital entrepreneurship has also been actively encouraged, especially in university education. Many leading universities have adopted and developed new courses or initiatives. We even begin to see the global movements that stimulate social entrepreneurship among children through mentoring programs.

However digital citizenship has often been ignored by educators and leaders. This is despite the fact that it is fundamental to a person's ability to use technology and to live in the digital world, a need that arises from an early age. A child should start learning digital citizenship as soon as possible, ideally when actively using games, social media, or any other digital device.

Educators tend to believe that children will acquire these skills alone or that these skills should be cultivated at home. However, due to the digital generation gap, the Z generation being the first to really grow in the era of smartphones and social networks, neither parents nor teachers know how to appropriately equip children with these skills. “Young children are exposed too frequently to cyber-related risks, such as technology addiction or cyber-bullying” (Moore 2017, p. 102). They can also absorb toxic behavioural rules that affect their ability to interact with others. While most children face such challenges, problematic exposure is amplified for vulnerable children, including those with special needs, minorities and those economically disadvantaged. They tend not to be more exposed to risk, but also face more severe results. The abilities that children need to learn are:

- Digital citizen identity: the ability to build and manage integrity with a healthy online and offline identity.
- Time management in front of the screen: the ability to manage time spent in front of screens, multitasking and self-control engagement in online and social media games.

- Internet harassment management: the ability to detect cyber-bullying and manage it wisely.
- Cybernetics: the ability to protect data by creating powerful passwords and managing various cyber attacks.
- Privacy management: the ability to discreetly manage all personal information shared online to protect their privacy and others.
- Critical thinking: the ability to distinguish between true and false information, good and harmful content, and reliable and controversial online contacts.
- Digital fingerprints: ability to understand the nature of fingerprints and their real consequences and to manage them responsibly.
- Digital empathy: the ability to show empathy to your own needs and feelings as well as to others in the online environment.

A quality education of digital citizenship must include evaluation and feedback opportunities. Evaluation tools should be comprehensive and tailored to assess not only hard skills but also soft skills. Finally, such assessments should serve as a means of providing feedback, which gives children a better understanding of their strengths and weaknesses so that they can find their own ways to success. Most importantly, individuals should initiate digital education of citizenship in their sphere of influence: parents in their homes, teachers in their classes, and leaders in their communities. Children are already immersed in the digital world and influence the way tomorrow's world will look like.

5. Benefits of technology use in English for Specific Purposes (ESP)

Educational institutions at all levels are largely the products of technology infrastructure and social circumstances of the past. Therefore, they have to consider how to adapt quickly to the new technological environment. Education must provide with knowledge, skills and values required to confront the challenges of the future. One of the challenges of educators is to keep up with the technological breakthroughs and consider how to integrate formal and informal learning in education.

As in general English language teaching and learning, technology in its various forms has long been used in ESP. ESP teachers have always used available tools to devise materials and create situations relevant to their students' needs. However, technology's role in language learning in general, and in ESP in particular, has changed over time and significantly so in recent years. Technology has also evolved and become more ubiquitous in everyday life, and particularly in the professional world. Today, technology has become integrated into the classroom physically and pedagogically rather than being an add on. Computers particularly have come to be seen and used as a tool to accomplish certain tasks or to communicate. Although technology has always played a role in ESP the internet has had a particularly strong impact. As ESP puts emphasis on the needs of learners, and authentic materials and tasks, IT has become a very suitable tool for ESP. Technology allows ESP learners to collaborate and engage in authentic communication in their professional discourse community, to access up-to-date information relevant to their profession, and to publish their ideas.

In the business world in particular, and generally in professional life, the internet has taken centre stage and allows, in an increasingly globalised world, fast and efficient

communication and collaboration, information generation, exchange, and management. The professional world today would in most cases not be possible without information technology. This places a challenge on teachers who need to prepare their ESP students to 'deal with global communicative practices online, in all their complexity. As learners' needs and authentic tasks are paramount in business English and other ESP courses, many language teachers have integrated the same kinds of technology into their courses which their learners use in their profession, whether it is the word processor and email, the internet as a source for authentic material and place for authentic communication, virtual conferencing platforms, simulation software, or, in recent years, mobile technologies.

Whereas in general English lessons even the teachers themselves can be a valuable resource for listening, speaking and authentic language use, in many cases, technology, whether, for example, in the form of videos or on the internet, is the only means for ESP students to access the specific language they need in order to communicate appropriately. Hafner and Miller (2017, p. 12) state that it is the "hybrid nature of ESP, having to teach both the language and the field-specific content that makes it challenging for teachers, who often do not have the field-specific knowledge to teach". Although it is not usually the case that teachers also have to teach the content, especially when teaching adult professionals, they do need to teach the field-specific language, which they might not always know, and which changes and develops over time. When teaching professionals, the needs also go beyond the language itself; they also require the use of authentic tasks, tools, and context.

Hafner and Miller (2017, p. 37) present the advantages of technology for ESP:

➤ Provides interaction and communicative activities representative of specific professional or academic environments.
➤ Fosters understanding of the socio-cultural aspects of the language as practiced in various fields and professions.
➤ Provides comprehensible field-specific input and facilitates student production.
➤ Uses task-based and inquiry-based strategies reflective of tasks in disciplines specific settings and situations.
➤ Uses authentic materials from specific disciplines and occupations.
➤ Supplies authentic audiences, including outside experts in specific fields.
➤ Supports cognitive abilities and critical thinking skills required in the disciplines.
➤ Uses collaborative learning.
➤ Facilitates focused practice for the development of reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills across the curriculum and disciplines.
➤ Is student-centred and addresses specific needs of students.
➤ Uses multiple modalities to support different learning styles.
➤ Provides appropriate feedback and assessment of content knowledge and English skills.

Table 1. Hafner and Miller (2017) Creativity and Digital Literacies in English for Specific Purposes

6. Conclusions

One of the ideas with the most damaging consequences that I have encountered in the Romanian public discourse is that education and access to culture are too expensive public services and cannot be managed by the professional elite of the field. According to this concept, the political elite has the mission to continuously reform the public education service in order to make it more comfortable for the beneficiaries and cheaper in terms of the expenses it entails. However, few understand that a society in which education is uncoordinated, devalued (and therefore ineffective), will never be able to sustain the creative resources that freedom of expression makes possible. The less it will deal with the risks that the information society and the knowledge economy impose. In such a context, public education is not only an absolutely necessary means of economic development but also a solid basis for preventing the reprehensible acts involved in the use of far too sophisticated technologies to be understood without sustained guidance. The development of the information society has given rise to new social practices, perceptions, mentalities that are not yet fully reflected in political debates and legal codes. Such areas are insufficiently regulated, but first of all poorly understood.

Freedom of expression and use of the communication resources made available to the World Wide Web has political and economic valences. The ability to communicate unrestrictedly, to inform and express their opinions, gives citizens a good means of participating in the public debate, becoming active members of the community. On the other hand, digital culture is a powerful stimulus for innovation and encourages creativity. The legitimate uses of such freedoms will be accompanied by abusive misappropriation of technology and unacceptable practices. Their discouragement is an end in itself. But even more important is the search for regulatory paths that will not overturn the essential contribution of technology.

Social responsibility and responsiveness to civil society, to the general public, must therefore also be a regulatory principle. Wide adoption of new technology involves risks and adaptation costs. "Understanding new cultural trends, new habits, new mentalities, is an indispensable landmark. Computers are more than just perfect TVs. The Internet is more than a very fast postal system" (Creeber & Martin 2013, p.123). But to find the best use of all these things, a continual training effort is required. An economy of knowledge implies the existence of a knowledge society, and a knowledge society can only be a society that makes full use of public education.

Digital technology appeared with a little delay in Romania and thus in an already mature form. Some of us have been taken somehow by surprise, for we have not participated in its early phases; but not the youngest, born directly in the digital age. But let's not forget that those born with the Internet were also born with the market economy, meaning no communism and planned economy. Not all differences of thinking and social practices of the new generation are therefore linked to the digital, many of them overlapping and mingling with the differences between communism and post-communism. But the most important features and implications are of course in the social field. For non-digital, the digital world is an artificial one in which human relations are no longer real, but only virtual, and in which knowledge is reduced to zapping.

Finally, the digital world is profoundly changing its nature and practices of knowledge, even conquering digital humanities. “We are arriving at a point where digital technologies are no longer merely tools, but increasingly participants in our increasingly participatory culture, for better or worse. The need to keep questioning our situation remains more pressing than ever, especially as the technology itself is more and more invisible as it becomes an integral part of the very fabric of our existence” (Gere 2015, p. 224).

First of all, the digital democratizes knowledge - which is very good. It's just that the truth is not democratic, and the digital culture tends to transform knowledge into opinion and truth into rating. On the other hand, digital culture flattens knowledge. Until recently, knowledge was going up vertically and used metaphors from mining: you had to go deep, to dig, to go to the root of things. Now it is going horizontally, all you have to do is surfing. Last but not least, digital culture flattens the language, universalizing it: simple structures inspired by phone messages, emoticons, but especially a kind of average Anglo-Saxon standard that does not correspond to any natural language, but which can mediate trans-linguistic communication.

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