

Quaderni di Comunità
Persone, Educazione e Welfare
nella società 5.0

Community Notebook
People, Education, and Welfare
in society 5.0

n. 3/2023

REINVENTING UNIVERSITY.

THE DIGITAL CHALLENGE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Edited by

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Iscrizione presso il Registro Stampa del Tribunale di Roma
al n. 172/2021 del 20 ottobre 2021

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Eurilink University Press Srl
Via Gregorio VII, 601 - 00165 Roma
www.eurilink.it - ufficiostampa@eurilink.it
ISBN: 979 12 80164 71 1
ISSN: 2785-7697 (Print)

Prima edizione, febbraio 2024
Progetto grafico di Eurilink

È vietata la riproduzione di questo libro, anche parziale,
effettuata con qualsiasi mezzo, compresa la fotocopia

INDICE

EDITORIAL

Stefania Capogna, Ligita Šimanskienė, and Erika Župerkienė 13

RUBRICA EDUCATION 19

1. University teachers' data literacy for pedagogical decision making
Aleksandra Batuchina and Julija Melnikova 21

RUBRICA EMPOWERMENT 35

1. Digital pharmacology
Gianluca Della Puppa 37

SAGGI 45

1. Digital innovations as the basis for the implementation of the Concept for the development of T-shaped skills in higher education
Halyna Mishenina, Ligita Šimanskienė, and Erika Župerkienė 47

2. The Shifting Paradigm of “Onlife Learning” in European Higher Education Institutes (HEIs): A Case of Working-Life Competence Development Best Practices
Paresh Rathod and Pasi Kämppi 91

3. Self-assessment in vet and higher education: links and further developments <i>Laura Evangelista and Concetta Fonzo</i>	121
4. Evaluation of Universities QoS using Fuzzy Cognitive Maps <i>Panagiotis Perivolaris and Vassilis Stylianakis</i>	155
5. The impact of digitalisation in scientific research: risks, opportunities and ethical challenges <i>Maria Chiara De Angelis</i>	195
MISCELLANEA	227
1. Modernity and Identity processes on the light of the diffusion of new digital technologies <i>Giuliana Parente</i>	229
2. L'impatto della pandemia sui comportamenti a rischio dei giovani: le challenge rischiose <i>Patrizio Pastore e Gerarda Grippo</i>	259
3. Le "destinazioni educative" della Generazione X: risultati e disuguaglianze in una prospettiva generazionale <i>Orazio Giancola e Matteo Bonanni</i>	289
APPROFONDIMENTI	325
1. Guidelines and Recommendations for Academic Bodies within the Framework of the Erasmus+ Project ECOLHE <i>Luca Torchia</i>	327
2. Nuove competenze e loro certificazione: sviluppi in Europa e in Italia <i>Fulvio Oscar Benussi</i>	333

RECENSIONI	341
Recensione del manuale <i>Understanding Organizational Culture</i> <i>Francesca Greco</i>	343

1. DIGITAL PHARMACOLOGY

by Gianluca Della Puppa*

Abstract: *The impact of digitalisation has completely revolutionized the socio-economic system of the world. The proliferation of new languages and the unlimited acquisition of data has brought the global dissemination of multidisciplinary practices and knowledge. However, this process carries itself the risk of thought automation. Therefore, to avoid the danger, it is necessary to understand the digitalisation process of life from a “pharmacological” perspective to identify quality-based practices, tools and activities that act as an antidote to the toxicity inherent in digital processes. In this regard, universities represent an indispensable resource to support the social change that started with the digital revolution because they are culturally engaged in research, identification, and development of innovative teaching tools oriented towards the quality of the digital experience. The university represents a unifying pole in which it is possible to form multidisciplinary communities that share the same ethical and social vision of digitalisation. The D-ChallengHE project, promoted by the DiTES Research Centre, meets this specific goal. Therefore, the purpose of this short contribution is to analyze how research projects like this can be a fundamental resource for sharing and promoting good practices for a critical understanding of digitalisation.*

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1. The impact of digital revolution

The world has been irreversibly transformed by digitalisation. The advent of digital technologies has been a breaking point of historical processes, inaugurating the so-called *New Economy*, a new phase of the socio-economic system characterized by the propagation of computer systems. Unlike industrial revolutions, digitalisation is not confined to a specific world region. Its spread has been so rapid and uncontrolled that it has become a global phenomenon within a few years.

The introduction of digital technologies has led to an improvement in real-time communications and information. In other words, the development of computer networks has allowed access to unlimited data and knowledge, encouraging the dissemination of different knowledge on a global scale. In a short time, the digital revolution has crept into every area of society, imposing on the whole world a constant race for innovation and the development of increasingly cutting-edge technologies. Every sector of the productive world, public and private, has had to rethink its structures in light of the innovations brought by the new IT tools. Therefore, in this sense, it is possible to talk about a real digitization of everyone's life.

2. Pharmacology and digitalisation

The proliferation and uncontrolled spread of digital tools, if not supported by adequate research and analysis plans, cannot alone guarantee an effective improvement of lives. Still, there is the risk that they become a simple dispositive of subjectivity (Foucault, 1978) aimed at commercial purposes rather than cultural ones. In other words, the absence of a critical thought that follows digital

phenomena risks to come true the predictions expressed by Gilles Deleuze in *Post-script on control societies* (Deleuze, 1990), inaugurating a new phase of the biopolitical control of human existence, guaranteed by the quantitative acquisition of data and information. To avoid the risk, which is always present, we need to ask ourselves about the quality of the digital experiences that affect individuals. In a few points, this presupposition aims to recover the concept of quality identified by Dewey to distinguish formative experiences from those aimed at themselves or even harmful to learning (Dewey, 1938). In other words, it is argued that without evaluation and monitoring of the quality of digital experiences, they risk an uncontrolled and harmful development that can reduce creativity and culture in processes of thought automation.

To address this threat, we need to take a “pharmacological” perspective of the digitalisation processes. As the French philosopher Bernard Stiegler says: «today digital is for us a *pharmakon*» (Stiegler, 2014: 33). The concept of *pharmakon*, in accordance with the definition offered by Jacques Derrida (Derrida, 1968), is used to identify the bivalence of digitalisation. On the one hand, digital can be a beneficial factor in terms of sharing knowledge and practices that are in line with the needs of individuals; on the other, it can reveal critical issues that, if not supported by critical thinking, risk compromising the meaning and benefits of the digital experience. Therefore, digitalisation can be both a remedy and a poison, a cure and a toxin, like a medicine with contraindications. So, the assumption of a “pharmacological” perspective has the task of laying the foundations for social therapy aimed at declining digitalisation processes to promote models and practices adapted to the actual needs. In this regard, adequate antidotes must be put up against the deviations that follow digitalisation.

The processes of digitalisation must not be feared or dismissed but must be understood and directed towards quality-based uses. It is clear, therefore, that there is an urgency for a digital pedagogy that can allow a more conscious use of digital technology, providing antidotes to the danger of abuse and qualitative ineffectiveness. The “pharmacological” reading advanced by Stiegler opens the door to the field of creative possibilities. A “digital pharmacology” is a process of critical revision of digitalisation that, through identifying beneficial and harmful factors, offers the opportunity to experiment and monitor technological processes from a qualitative point of view. In this sense, knowledge must become critical through multidisciplinary processes that follow the advent and production of new digital tools. Therefore, the assumption of a “pharmacological” perspective, multidisciplinary and prolonged in time, ensures the possibility of identifying models, tools and practices in line with a qualitative and sustainable conception of technological progress.

a. The role of universities and the value of networks

In this context, even the learning models and the university institutions have had to deal with the need to support their functions with digital technologies to keep up with the times and new training needs, introduced by the *New Economy*. Specifically, the issue is identifying best digital practices that can be integrated into learning processes. From this point of view, universities play a fundamental role because they represent a unifying pole where it is possible to share experiences, techniques, and useful digital tools to promote culture. The aim is twofold: on the one hand, the cultural value of knowledge and research; on the other, identifying good digital practices responds to a specific social

purpose, dominating “pharmacologically” the technological knowledge to put it at the individual’s service.

Establishing synergistic relations between universities, teachers, researchers, and students is necessary for technological progress in qualitative terms. Therefore, research must form a multidisciplinary network that guarantees a shared and participatory vision of the potential of digitalisation and possible critical issues. The implementation of communications on a global scale, breaking down national boundaries, requires universities to confront themselves on these issues, researching and identifying technological innovations functional to the real progress of culture and society.

b. The D-ChallengHE project

The D-ChallengHE project¹, promoted by the DiTES Research Centre, in collaboration with a dense network of national and international partners, responds exactly to the above-given needs. The primary objective is to establish a network of multidisciplinary interconnections that can identify innovations suitable for integration in learning and teaching contexts. In other words, through the creation of a network of researchers and teachers from different parts of the world and therefore with different experiences, the project aims to promote digital transformation according to a common and shared vision, ethically involved in identifying best practices and tools that can be used in learning processes.

To achieve this goal, the project has created a *hub* and a permanent research observatory where university institutions, researchers, teachers and scientists can share the best digital

¹ Official website: <https://d-challenghe.unilink.it/>.

practices in education. Therefore, this process aims to define quality standards for evaluating and identifying tools to improve learning processes effectively. Moreover, through a meticulous collection of scientific publications on collectively established themes, the project provides for the provision of a large amount of different materials, which can be used both theoretically and in strictly practical terms within processes of empowerment and experimentation that involve territory and population, encouraging a conscious use of technology for the enhancement of social capital. This operation aims to promote the application of critical and multidisciplinary thinking about digital innovations, creating a space for aggregation based on the value of sharing and mutual trust. In other words, by crossing international boundaries and mixing different practices, tools and experiences, a genuine research community is being established that wants to become an active agent of change to decline the digital revolution under the unique principle of quality, a necessary condition for the therapeutic realization of a nascent “digital pharmacology”.

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