
New Frontiers of Digital Learning Platforms: A Workshop about Digital Education Ethics

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For several years, digital technologies have been changing education dramatically. The technology impact on education will increase even more in the near future. To give an example, the EdTech market that includes all forms of technology-enhanced education is a highly attractive investment segment for diverse venture capitalist firms and not just a wide variety of different educational start-ups and diverse applications (HolonIQ, 2019).

Furthermore, Digital Learning Platforms (Faustmann et al, 2019) provide lifelong learning experiences with personalised courses, social interaction and collaboration, based on data-driven learning and teaching models. As a disruptive innovation for the education industry, they open the doors to an easy and payable access to different kinds of education for everyone. These positive effects of education democratisation are in fact limited by market power and competitive advantages by a few big education companies. As a consequence, they are able to transform education into a “Netflix Model of Education” (Horvath, 2019). This means a plannable and consumable education like an on-demand event. Digital Learning Platforms fulfil this vision perfectly by providing such learning experiences in an apparently convenient way. In reality, the learners are not more than merely users and education not more than a service, both feeding the value of the business model. From an economic perspective, this is inevitable as it is the way the platform economy functions (Parker et al, 2016). Such business models combine an extremely large active user base with a vast IT infrastructure and highly focused user-centred services (McAfee & Brynjolfsson, 2017). As a result, Digital Learning Platforms are not only stipulating the structures and content of education, but also payment models and user access. Education, formerly a more or less public asset, is now transforming into a commodity with a defined value that is influenced by market transactions.

Isn't it now the time for a new way of thinking about the purpose of technology-enhanced education? Surely, we need a digital ethical discussion about the design and usage of digital technologies for education. Ethics is at the very least a common understanding for values and practices about the morals of human beings and their behaviour in society. Our definition of digital ethics builds on Floridi's work, which addresses it as “... the branch of ethics that studies and evaluates moral problems relating to data and information, ... algorithms ... and corresponding practices and infrastructures ... in order to formulate and support morally good solutions” (Floridi, 2018, p. 3).

In a similar way, we perceive Digital Education Ethics as a multi-dimensional perspective about values and aims of digital education. Such a framework encompasses dimensions like Society, Economy, Institutions and Individuals.

The major aim of the workshop is twofold: to define and discuss which elements influence these dimensions, and to determine both the relationships between the elements and the dynamic of the whole framework, based on the experiences of the participants too. Our target is to come up with the design of a trustworthy digital-driven education, based on common ethical standards.

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