HOW CAN 'DIGITISATION OF EDUCATION' BE USED TO SUPPORT THE RIGHT TO EDUCATION AND THE PRESERVATION OF HUMAN VALUES?

Juan García-Gutiérrez
New Humanity (Geneva) &
Faculty of Education (UNED)

On behalf of **New Humanity** we congratulate the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education, **Ms. Koumbou Boly Barry**, for opening a period of reflection for her next report on "digitization of education" and, therefore, for giving us the possibility to share our reflections on the impacts of digital and emerging technologies on the promotion and protection of the right to education and education for human rights.

This reflection is extremely important and necessary because during the period of drafting of the right to education (especially in the Universal Declaration and the Covenants, but even in later instruments such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child) the Internet and these types of technologies and digital advances did not exist, much less were they so deeply rooted in society. Therefore, as the former Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education, Mr. K. Singh, did in his report on "Issues and challenges to the right to education in the digital age" (A/HRC/32/37, 6 April 2016) and the Committee on the rights of the Child in the General Comment on Children's rights in the relation to the digital environment (CRC/C/CG/25, 2 March 2021), the Rapporteur has also opened the way for an 'update' of the right to education in the digital and technological fields [1].

On the other hand, the COVID-19 pandemic has offered us a massive and universal experience of the use of digital technologies to safeguard, in many cases, the very exercise of the right to education in face-to-face institutions. However, in contrast to the light shed by these positive experiences, we have also discovered the shadows caused by massive and uncritical digitalization in educational processes: the technological gap and digital exclusion is a worrying fact, the uncritical assumption of technological means without prior reflection on their relevance and pedagogical sense or the introduction of "commercial values" in the field of education are just some of them.

We believe that one of the objectives of the report should be to clarify the meaning of educational digitalization from a humanistic approach. This means deepening the implications for educational digitization of the recognition and primacy of the full development of the personality as an educational goal, while promoting, as the previous Rapporteur, Mr. Singh, pointed out in the mentioned Report 'common values'. Therefore, the promotion of common values should also be the object and included in the processes of 'educational digitalization'.

In addition, the processes of educational digitization from a humanistic approach should include, among others, the following general principles:

- Educational digitization processes should promote the full development of the human personality, attending to the uniqueness of individuals and the sense of their dignity and, also, respect the common human values contained in the Universal Declaration and their particular form of expression through the various cultures.

- In any educational action involving algorithms must be respectful of human dignity and human rights and, therefore, include the principles of equality, inclusion and educational non-discrimination, in accordance with the principles contained in the recent UNESCO 'Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence' (SHS/BIO/REC-AIETHICS/2021).

- The pedagogical judgment of educators and their academic freedom must prevail in all educational digitization processes. Even in digitized, virtual, online or technologically mediated educational processes, the educational relationship between teacher and student is a major pedagogical resource that should not be marginalized.

- Any educational innovation associated with digital technologies must be accompanied by a prior ethical-pedagogical reflection that helps to understand and adequately situate its educational impact from the perspective of the full development of the human personality.

- Universalize access to the Internet and, in general, to emerging technologies and mobile devices in accordance with Article 27 of the Universal Declaration and Article 15 of the Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Therefore, as also recommended by the High-Level Panel on Digital Cooperation, it will be necessary to facilitate inclusive, affordable [2], even free, access to digital networks. The precept of "leaving no one behind" in the digital world begins with access to technology but must continue with digital training focused not only on the use of technology but also on the education of a critical sense in the digital world.

We are convinced of the progress of humanity thanks to technological development if it is accompanied by an ethic based on a vision of the common good, an ethic of freedom, responsibility and fraternity, capable of favoring the full development of people in relation to others and to creation [3], based on the values of humility, responsibility and solidarity [4] and balance.

To conclude this contribution to the work of the Rapporteur in her report, we consider attaching an article to describe an a 'good practice' on how digital tech can be used to support the right to education and the preservation of human values thought an innovative virtual service-learning project. Some 100 Spanish students and more than 500 African students have participated in this experience over the last 5 years. This pioneering experience in the development of virtual service-learning is linked to SDG 4 and the promotion of intercultural encounter and dialogue as well as global citizenship.

NOTES:

[1] We must highlight and recognize the efforts of the various committees and entities associated with the United Nations system (such as UNESCO or UNICEF) to maintain a constant reflection on the impact of emerging digital technologies on human rights. Among others, we highlight the report of the Human Rights Council Advisory Committee 'New and emerging digital technologies and human rights' (A/HRC/AC/25/CRP.2), and the Secretary General's 'roadmap for digital cooperation' (June 2020). Even the contributions of civil society in terms of the so-called 'Neuro-rights' promoted by the researcher Rafael Yuste through the 'neurorights initiative'.
[2] Report of the Secretary General's High-Level Panel on Digital Cooperation 'The Age of Digital Interdependence' (June 2019).
[3] Address of the Holy Father Francis to participants in a seminar on 'the common good in the digital age' (27/9/2019).
[4] M. Sandel, 2007, The Case Against Perfection. Ethics in the Age of Genetic Engineering, Harvard University Press.

NewHumanity | Via Piave, 15 | 00046 Grottaferrata (Rome) | Italy | +39.0694315635 | info@new-humanity.org | www.new-humanity.org

Page | 2

THE CARITAS IN VERITATE FOUNDATION WORKING PAPERS
"The City of God in the Palace of Nations"

Education as a Driver to Integral Growth and Peace

Ethical Reflections on the Right to Education

NewHumanity | Via Piave, 15 | 00046 Grottaferrata (Rome) | Italy | +39.0694315635 | info@new-humanity.org | www.new-humanity.org

Page | 3

HOW CAN DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES BE USED TO SUPPORT THE RIGHT TO EDUCATION AND THE PRESERVATION OF HUMAN VALUES?

A *Caritas in Veritate* Foundation Report by

DR. JUAN GARCÍA-GUTIÉRREZ, PHD
Faculty of Education, National Distance Education University (UNED), Madrid and New Humanity, Geneve

1. Introduction

The digital environment is of great concern not only for professors, communicators and families, but also for governments, political leaders, and even religious leaders. In fact, Pope Francis recently referred to the digital environment as "an extraordinary opportunity for dialogue, encounter, and exchange between people, as well as access to information and knowledge" and as an opportunity for "social and political engagement and active citizenship." However, he also warns us about "forms of control as subtle as they are invasive," and about the creation of "mechanisms for the manipulation of consciences and of the democratic process"[1].

Due to the two-sided nature of technology (positive and negative uses and senses), it is necessary to put a pedagogy in place which helps us to reflect on the meaning of technology, rather than being limited to its utility. That is to say, an education in technology must include and stress the human element, which cannot be lost under any circumstances or in any environment. It is not enough to know that using digital technology is necessary. First and most importantly, we must reflect on the purpose of digital technology and why it must remain linked to human values like creativity, critical thinking, solidarity and prudence.

In this essay, we will examine how to use technology to promote human values, the "spirit of brotherhood[2]" and human solidarity as it has been developed successively by the United Nations Special Rapporteurs appointed for this purpose[3]. To demonstrate these principles in action, we will look at a service-learning called "Spanish Live" (*Español en Vivo*) developed by the innovation group COETIC of the Faculty of Education at the National Distance Education University (UNED), Madrid.

> Due to the two-sided nature of technology (positive and negative uses and senses), it is necessary to put a pedagogy in place which helps us to reflect on the meaning of technology, rather than being limited to its utility. That is to say, an education in technology must include and stress the human element, which cannot be lost under any circumstances or in any environment.

NewHumanity | Via Piave, 15 | 00046 Grottaferrata (Rome) | Italy | +39.0694315635 | info@new-humanity.org | www.new-humanity.org

Page | 4

2. Promoting human values through virtual service-learning

Can digital technologies help us to grow as human beings? Is it possible to pass on values through cyberspace? Can technologies help us to understand and accept each other and our differences? Can we develop civic commitment regarding global citizenship by means of cyberspace? Pedagogical literature shows that international organizations are concerned that universities and other institutions of higher education are focusing on students' technical and professional training, and thus their employability, to the detriment of their social skills, character, civic responsibility and engagement. In 2017, the European Union recommended ensuring that "higher education institutions are not ivory towers, but civic-minded learning communities connected to their communities[4]."

This is the path in which service-learning methodology is heading. It is known that service-learning can adopt various names like "community service," "learning from community volunteer work", "community-based learning", "civic engagement" etc. All refer to a form of community-based education. To clarify this active and practical methodology, two vectors help identify service-learning projects as opposed to other practices developed in universities. The two vectors are community service and intentional learning[5].

In activities highlighting the service component we find university volunteering programs, university cooperation, and community service. In these cases, the focus is on the help, or the alleviation, of a social need, and less on the practical skills learned by the students. When the emphasis is on intentional learning, other activities appear such as work placement, field work, and internships. This vector emphasizes the link between the practical activity and the learning of materials, and does not focus on community collaboration and on addressing problems or social needs.

Service-learning projects however constitute a type of active education based on experience, in which learning, skills development, and community service are all combined in a single and unitarian project. A link is established between learning and service in such a way that knowledge and the learning environment have a humanitarian intentionality: to make a difference in the community. At the same time, community service becomes a practical and real experience for learning and the development of skills and values.

Usually, the word 'community' transmits an idea of closeness, but this is not necessarily territorial or geographical. In fact, developing a relationship with the community through service-learning can help to reach bigger or more distant communities, and ultimately, connect to the idea of global community, and therefore a responsibility toward humanity. In these cases, service-learning is an international global method, since the experience takes place in developing countries and addresses the notion of global

> Pedagogical literature shows that international organizations are concerned that universities and other institutions of higher education are focusing on students' technical and professional training, and thus their em-ployability, to the detriment of their social skills, character, civic responsibility and engagement.

> Service-learning projects however constitute a type of active education based on experience, in which learning, skills development, and community service are all combined in a single and unitarian project. A link is established between learning and service in such a way that knowledge and the learning environment have a humanitarian intentionality: to make a difference in the community.

NewHumanity | Via Piave, 15 | 00046 Grottaferrata (Rome) | Italy | +39.0694315635 | info@new-humanity.org | www.new-humanity.org

Page | 5

citizenship. At the same time, this facilitates the introduction of content related to sustainable development, to give just one example.

In addition, the possibility exists to project this methodology into cyberspace through digital technologies. This is known as online or virtual service-learning[6]. This method incorporates and unites the positive effects of face-to-face service-learning to the pedagogical possibilities of the internet and digital technologies based on the notion of 'ubiquitous learning' in particular. Specifically, with the use of the Internet and other information and communication technologies, 'ubiquitous learning[7]' is introduced, breaking down temporary barriers as a result, such as geographic impediments. Said another way, learning is made possible in any place and at any time. The notion of access and portability therefore is key. Drawing on these characteristics, service-learning is learning at any time and in any place, depending on the application environment, and supported by digital tools that allow the inclusion of different participants in the formation process[8]. Through service-learning, we can also pedagogically spread the development of civic engagement through cyberspace.

In this context, 'Spanish Live' initially came about in response to needs expressed by a group of students studying Spanish at the University of Porto Novo in Benín. It is a pioneer project in service-learning, and was developed in the context of distance education that is web and digital technology-based. The project is geared towards promoting human values, such as civic responsibility, by means of intercultural dialogue and global citizenship development. This pedagogical experience is therefore presented as a case study connecting the advocacy of human values, as indicated by the former UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education, Kishore Singh, with the Internet and digital technologies. This project was developed by the Innovation Group COETIC at UNED together with various African universities: the University of Abomey-Calavi (UAC) and the *Escuela Normal Superior of Porto Novo* (Benín), Strathmore University (Kenya), and the University of Dschang (Cameroon).

The project is relatively simple. 'Spanish Live' fosters a series of virtual encounters between Spanish and African university students, with the goal of practicing Spanish live. The project came about as a result of the African students' need to speak and practice their Spanish with native speakers. At the same time, the Spanish students develop various intersectional skills, as laid out in the skills map of the university, particularly those related to ethics and civic engagement.

During the development phase, students on both sides carried out various preparatory activities both individually and in groups. The Spanish students prepared for interviews with their African classmates using themes and content from their courses as a starting point. This way, prior to the virtual meeting, they become interested in learning about their African classmates' lives and countries, while preparing a series of questions to

> Drawing on these characteristics, service-learning is learning at any time and in any place, depending on the application environment, and supported by digital tools that allow the inclusion of different participants in the formation process.

> The project is geared towards promoting human values, such as civic responsibility, by means of intercultural dialogue and global citizenship development.

> 'Spanish Live' fosters a series of virtual encounters between Spanish and African university students, with the goal of practicing Spanish live.

NewHumanity | Via Piave, 15 | 00046 Grottaferrata (Rome) | Italy | +39.0694315635 | info@new-humanity.org | www.new-humanity.org

Page | 6

shape the discussion. Once the interviews are prepared, they are sent to the coordinators at the African universities, as well as the students, so they can prepare their answers before the virtual meeting. Finally, the online interviews of at least three times 30 minute sessions are carried out via various instant messaging programs (Skype, WhatsApp etc.).

3. What has been learned from the virtual service-learning project?

One significant result has been the verification, thanks to the Internet and digital technologies, of not only the viability of this type of online approach, but also the warm acceptance between the students. The development of a virtual modality in service-learning is necessary because it allows distance and/or online-learning institutions to offer innovative educational experiences which some students would not otherwise have due to work, family, disability, etc. Additionally, it can be verified that by relying on appropriate methodology and technology, the virtual environment is conducive to developing ethical and civic skills. In these cases, it is important that digitization does not replace the presence of a person or said another way, that technologies do not mask or simulate the reality of a personal encounter, but instead drive and facilitate a face-to-face between students.

Results among students have been very positive. The majority of the students had not known about or participated in this type of service-learning projects before, but once they decided to participate, they made a wide range of discoveries regarding learning and skills development. As indicated previously in other projects, the results observed concerned three separate fields: learning related to different pedagogical cultures; learning pertaining to global citizenship and international dialogue; and lastly, learning related to the development of communication skills[9]. Since the academic year of 2018/2019, a renewed evaluation process called the 'Intercultural Field-Notebook' allows students to address different issues, reflecting on and recounting their own personal experience throughout the project. From this perspective, the three objectives most valued by the students were (in this order): to develop civic engagement through global citizenship, and use intercultural dialogue as a way to overcome prejudices and foster a culture of peace; to become familiar with the design and implementation of innovative pedagogical activities; and to get to know different pedagogical cultures existing in an international context. Ultimately, this type of cyberspace project offers the possibility to try out, in a practical way, different kinds of learning and skills-building. Above all, this type of experience helps to construct and conceive the Internet as a place of solidarity and encounter.

The development of a virtual modality in service-learning is necessary because it allows distance and/or online-learning institutions to offer innovative educational experiences which some students would not otherwise have due to work, family, disability, etc.

The results observed concerned three separate fields: learning related to different pedagogical cultures; learning pertaining to global citizenship and international dialogue; and lastly, learning related to the development of communication skills.

To develop civic engagement through global citizenship, and use intercultural dialogue as a way to overcome prejudices and foster a culture of peace; to become familiar with the design and implementation of innovative pedagogical activities; and to get to know different pedagogical cultures existing in an international context.

NewHumanity | Via Piave, 15 | 00046 Grottaferrata (Rome) | Italy | +39.0694315635 | info@new-humanity.org | www.new-humanity.org

Page | 7

4. Conclusion

It is less necessary to remember that "education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace" (and this 'full development' also includes the religious or spiritual dimension of human being).[10]

We recognize that digital technology easily extends and prolongs the educational phenomenon by diluting the boundaries between formal and non-formal educational parameters, in a lifelong learning continuum, where non-formal education takes on a greater role. However, one of the consequences of the irruption of the Internet and technologies in education has been the ease with which private providers of education multiply. What can be supposed, as the former UN Special Rapporteur indicates, is a threat to education as a public good; the promotion of material values to the detriment of the humanist mission of education; and a impairment of students' abilities to think critically.[11]

> However, one of the consequences of the irruption of the Internet and technologies in education has been the ease with which private providers of education multiply.

Finally, it is necessary that the international organizations encourage and support a broad reflection on the so-called "fourth generation human rights" or "digital rights". An example of this are the good practices followed by the Children Rights Commitment. First, through the "Day of General Discussion on Digital Media and Children's Rights" (2014), and then with the "Concept Note for a General Comment on Children's Rights in Relation to the Digital Environment" (2019).

NOTES

1. Pope Francisco (2019). Apostolic Exhortation *Christus Vivit*, para. 87, 89.

2. Universal Declaration of Human Rights, art.1.

3. Singh, K. (2016). Report of the Special Rapporteur on the right to education (A/HRC/32/37); K. Boly Barry, K. B. (2019). Report of the Special Rapporteur on the right to education (A/HRC/41/37); also vid. Report of the UN Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Digital Cooperation (2019). The age of digital interdependence.

4. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions On a renewed UE agenda for Higher Education (COM2017 164 final).

5. Tapia, N. (2006). Aprendizaje y servicio solidario. En el sistema educativo y las organizaciones juveniles. Buenos Aires: Ciudad Nueva.

6. Guthrie, K. & McCracken, H. (2010). Making a difference online: facilitating service-learning through distance education. *Internet and Higher Education*, 13, 153-157; García-Gutiérrez, J. Ruiz-Corbella, M. & del Pozo, A. (2017). Developing Civic Engagement in Distance Higher Education: A Case Study of Virtual Service-Learning (vSL) programme in Spain. *Open Praxis*, 9 (2), 235-244.

NewHumanity | Via Piave, 15 | 00046 Grottaferrata (Rome) | Italy | +39.0694315635 | info@new-humanity.org | www.new-humanity.org

Page | 8

7. Burbules, N. C. (2009). Meanings of ubiquitous learning. In B. Cope & M. Kalantzis (eds.) Ubiquitous Learning (pp. 15.20). Urbana: University of Illinois Press

8. Báez, C. y Clunie, B. (2019). Una mirada a la Educación Ubicua. *RIED Revista Iberoamericana de Educación a Distancia*, 22:1, 325-344.

9. García-Gutiérrez, J.; Ruiz-Corbella, M.; y del Pozo, A. (2016). Cuando la comunidad se expande: ciudadanía global y aprendizaje-servicio virtual. *Educación y Diversidad*, 10:2, 63-75.

10. Dias Ferreiras, J. (2018). Theological, anthropology and human rights. In Permanent Observer Mission of the Holy See to the United Nations. Right to live and human dignity. 70º Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Vid. http://new-humanity.org/it/attivita/ginevra/591-new-humanity-riflette-a-ginevra-sulla-dignita-della-vita-per-celebrare-il-70esimo-anniversario-della-dichiarazione-dei-diritti-umani.html

11. Singh, K. (2016). Report of the Special Rapporteur on the right to education (A/HRC/32/37).

NewHumanity | Via Piave, 15 | 00046 Grottaferrata (Rome) | Italy | +39.0694315635 | info@new-humanity.org | www.new-humanity.org

Page | 9