Meeting of Ministers of Education – 26 November 2019 – Paris

Citizenship education in the digital era
Ministerial Declaration

We, Ministers of Education of the States Parties to the 1954 European Cultural Convention, met in Paris on 26 November 2019 to confirm our shared commitment to the education and training of informed, responsible citizens in the digital age.

Preamble

— At a time when digital technologies and the Internet are part of daily life, and are transforming how people relate to each other, we reaffirm the importance of human rights, democracy and the rule of law which hold us together and should remain as the core values and principles of our societies and constitute the basis of education for preparing our citizens for life as responsible, informed and active members of society in the digital age.

— We firmly believe that education should empower our citizens with digital and functional skills as well as competences for democratic culture (CDC) enshrined in the Council of Europe's *Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture* (RFCDC)[1] and we subscribe to the definition of digital citizenship as "the ability to engage positively, critically and competently in the digital environment, drawing on the skills of effective communication and creation, practicing forms of social participation that are respectful of human rights and dignity through the responsible use of technology" and endorse the concept of digital citizenship education set out by the Council of Europe in the *Digital Citizenship Education Handbook*[2], and is addressed in more detail in the Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers to member States on developing and promoting digital citizenship education[3].

— We consider that digital citizenship education is consistent with and will contribute to the commitments made under the United Nation's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, particularly with regard to Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4), which seeks to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and provide lifelong learning opportunities for all and which emphasises education for sustainable development.

Opportunities and challenges

We share the following observations:

— The digital environment and technologies provide unprecedented means for people to express themselves in various forms, to discover, learn and create, to communicate and socialise. In this perspective, mastery of digital tools and their technical complexity has become essential to social, economic and professional inclusion. Digital competency should be attained by all pupils from an early age, taking into account their degree of maturity. In particular, it opens new opportunities to reinforce access and inclusion for all learners, including those with special educational needs.

— At a time when access to information via digital technology is expanding constantly, constituting genuine progress, citizens should have the necessary analytical and critical thinking skills to

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1 https://www.coe.int/en/web/campaign-free-to-speak-safe-to-learn/reference-framework-of-competences-for-democratic-culture
2 https://www.coe.int/en/web/learning-resources/-/digital-citizenship-education-handbook-being-child-in-the-age-of-technology
3 https://search.coe.int/cm/Pages/result_details.aspx?ObjectId=090000168098de08

interpret, understand and assess the veracity and relevance of this massive variety of data. Young people are most exposed and should be prepared to understand the risks.

— Although the use of data raises questions of security and protection, data collected in education institutions in accordance with data protection standards (such as the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation and the Council of Europe's Convention for the Protection of Individuals with regard to Automatic Processing of Personal Data), offer prospects for the improvement of learning, teaching and assessment.

— In order for everyone to benefit fully from the use of communication technologies, digital citizenship education needs to raise pupils' awareness of the possible negative impact of inappropriate use of digital tools on individual and public health issues (addictions, concentration problems, behavioural problems, etc.), on societal issues (emergence of hate speech and cyber violence, such as cyber bullying between pupils) and on environmental issues (energy consumption and waste management).

— Algorithms and artificial intelligence are becoming part of the digital services people are using. Digital citizenship education can empower learners and professionals in education to better understand and use algorithm-based tools. For example, the use of the Internet can lead us to delegate some of our choices, sometimes without being aware of it, to algorithms which are never neutral. These algorithms can reduce our freedom of choice and promote content that is divisive generating reactions to the detriment of informative content. However, if developed with discernment, artificial intelligence does represent a promising instrument for teaching.

In this context, we consider that digital citizenship education has become a crucial aspect of education and training, alongside the development of digital skills, as it:

— allows pupils to acquire social intelligence, confidence and personal fulfilment, as well as the digital skills needed to ensure that digital technology is used for the benefit of society;

— goes hand in hand with media literacy: a responsible use of the Internet should incorporate education in critical thinking with regard to the content delivered, produced and shared by digital tools;

— enables pupils to acquire the skills and knowledge they need to understand the information given, through critical and reserved reading, to be capable of publishing and producing information and informing themselves responsibly, as well as to be able to shield themselves from any enterprise or attempt to manipulate them. It should enable pupils to use and create digital content, to explore opportunities for their personal and professional development, and to engage positively as actors in the digital environment;

— should contribute to raising awareness of discrimination and bias based on gender stereotypes and thus contribute, *inter alia*, to creating greater educational opportunities and ensure that all citizens benefit fully from the digital revolution;

— will thus enable learners to better understand, respect and protect their fundamental rights and guarantee the well-being of individuals – including themselves.

Commitments

Faced with these challenges, we endeavour to incorporate digital citizenship education into all areas of learning, in order to:

— ensure that all pupils master digital skills within digital citizenship education from an early age, taking into account their evolving capacities, in order to prepare them fully for higher education, the working world and society, which are all marked by the growing presence of digital technology;

— ensure that learners acquire ethical and responsible use of digital tools, so that they can:

  ► fully benefit from the opportunities offered by technologies while understanding the ethical issues relating to data (collection, storage and protection of personal data; respect for the privacy of the data of others, confidentiality and digital traceability);

  ► benefit from the social participation the digital environment may offer, bearing in mind the risks and dangers involved in the use of digital tools and protect themselves against content and behaviour that could damage their health and well-being;

  ► understand the implications of the user's own behaviour (users have a responsibility for what they put online and the digital tools they create);

  ► learn responsible and constructive communication strategies in digital environments;

  ► understand the possibilities for enhancing wellbeing, social cohesion, creativity and participation by positively contributing in digital environments;

  ► understand the environmental impact of the use of digital tools and limit their effects.

— strengthen the development of pupils' critical thinking in the digital context, by enabling them to distinguish established facts from mere opinions without evidence, and to reject stereotypes (including stereotypes based on gender), hate speech and cyberbullying;

— provide media literacy, based on tangible examples and varied scenarios to develop the ability of pupils to examine information critically and promote their responsible, active and creative participation in the information environment;

— take into account each pupil's learning abilities and special needs;

— implement effective strategies to define and assess learning outcomes for digital citizenship education.

To achieve these educational objectives, we also endeavour to:

— draw on the potential of digital technologies to support inclusive citizenship education, especially for facilitating learning for pupils with special educational needs;

— organise quality initial and continuous training for teachers in media education and in the use of digital technologies and encourage them to exploit the potential for the improvement of teaching methods offered by technologies, including artificial intelligence;

— facilitate the co-operation of all stakeholders (educational communities, parents, civil society and public authorities) for the promotion of digital citizenship education projects in a cross-sectorial manner, taking into account the balance between empowering and protecting young people;

— support the contributions of fundamental and comparative research and innovative teaching methodology in order to build evidence-based policies (e.g. on the use of data and the transparency of algorithms) and to develop the competences for a democratic culture;

— encourage international co-operation in the field of digital citizenship education, in order to identify common concerns, interests and priorities.