

ONLIFE SELFHOOD AND INTRINSIC CHARACTERISTICS OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES: AN EDUCATIONAL APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

There is no doubt that the development of the 'self' in the modern world is a fairly complex process. Hyperconnectivity, over-information and a whole series of characteristics of our times have a direct influence on the construction of this 'self'. It is for this reason that the field of education needs to address this construction. So far, by viewing information and communication technologies (ICT) as mere means, the dominant pedagogical discourse has concentrated on establishing good practices and limits on their use. This paper, on the other hand, will seek to show that this strategy of pedagogical action is not only insufficient, but also inadequate. To do so, we will first describe the model of 'self' that, through these good practices and imposed limits, we are trying to protect. We will then show the extent to which this type of 'self' does not fit in with today's world. We will do this by highlighting the importance of understanding ICT as an end in itself, and not merely as a means. Finally, we will conclude by highlighting the need for an educational approach that is based on this teleological focus on technology.

CCS CONCEPTS

• :: **Human-centered computing** → Human computer interaction (HCI);

KEYWORDS

Philosophy of education, reontologization, digital technologies, identity, education, pedagogy

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1 INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that identity is a complex issue in the modern world. While in ancient history and the Middle Ages, individuality

was considered to be of lesser importance than the community, the rise of modernity in the West from the 16th century onwards changed this dynamic. For Aristotle it was clear that "the city-state is prior in nature to the household and to each of us individually. For the whole must necessarily be prior to the part; since when the whole body is destroyed, foot or hand will not exist except in an equivocal sense, like the sense in which one speaks of a hand sculptured in stone as a hand; because a hand in those circumstances will be a hand spoiled, and all things are defined by their function and capacity" 1. This was true to the extent that if, for whatever reason, the community was destroyed, the existence of its individual members lost all meaning. All things were defined by a function and capacity given to them by the whole of which they formed a part. If this disappeared, so did the concrete definition of each of its parts. This is why everyone was willing to give his/her life for their community; because nothing existed beyond it.

It is precisely this basic principle that Modernity came to question. From the late Middle Ages and during the Renaissance, the worldly human being started to gain greater importance. This would shape the ideas of Descartes, who would not only defend the principle that the individual could exist separately from his/her community, but that the 'self' was the only thing that could not be doubted 2. From this point on, it would not be the individual who would be subordinated to the community, but the other way around. It would be the community that would need to subordinate itself to the interests of the individual. It should come of no surprise that, from that point on, it was the contractualist political currents that were the most prominent. That is to say, those currents focused on reaching prior agreements that would avoid a more-than-likely conflict in the face of opposing interests. These minimum agreements are those that have governed, in a generalised manner, Western democracies up until the present day. While they help to protect the freedoms of individuals, when we study them from the perspective of communities and collectives, they are not without their problems 3. However, we aren't going to address this matter in this paper. What we are interested in pointing out is that, when the possibility of the 'self' existing independently of the collective or community that shaped it at birth is opened up, identity becomes a complex matter.

This complexity is due, among other things, to the possibility of experimentation. It is true that one is born into a specific community. However, if you learn to perceive this community as a simple option, your mind will be opened to other ways of thinking. Today, in fact, we tend to celebrate this plurality and the possibility of belonging to diverse groups at the same time. The opportunity of the modern Western individual to move between different ways of seeing the world and belonging means that he/she is able to develop multiple and complex identities. As the French-Lebanese

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writer Amin Maalouf argues, it can be argued that in our world, the heir of Modernity, “there is always a certain hierarchy among the elements that go to make up individual identities [and] that hierarchy is not immutable; it changes with time, and in so doing brings about fundamental changes in behaviour” 4. He provides various examples of people with multi-faceted identities who feel like they belong to different communities and whose hierarchy of belonging is subject to change (particularly if one of these identities is threatened). According to Maalouf, it is the sensations of threat and fear, as well as attempts to end pluralism, that are the main causes of fundamentalism.

Preventing such violent behaviour is precisely what intercultural education aims to do. This type of education seeks to show younger generations how to coexist in harmony with one another, without feeling like their identity is under threat 5. It does not matter that identity may change with the passage of time, nor does it matter that there are belongings that define us to a greater or lesser extent: the main thing is being able to experience all of them without fear. However, it is assumed here that, despite their multi-faceted identities and the possibility of changing between them, the individual always possesses a specific identity of his/her own, the free development of which brings them stability. It is this basic principle, obvious to everyone until just a few years ago, that has brought digital reality into question. Digital reality has brought with it, as Luciano Floridi argues, a re-ontologisation of the world, changing the coordinates under which it could previously be analysed 6.

The multi-faceted way of experiencing identity is not the same as it was back then, when a clear distinction could still be made between the online and offline spheres. It is for this reason that identity cannot be educationally approached in the same manner, although we seem to be determined to do so. This paper aims, first of all, to show to what extent and why identity development is generally approached, in the field of education, from the wrong perspective. To do so, we will describe what is most valued about the modern ‘self’ and point out how difficult it is to maintain this ‘self’ in the modern world. Secondly, we will propose a more appropriate way of accompanying, from an educational perspective, the development of self-identification of future generations. This will involve viewing digital technologies as objects with specific intrinsic characteristics, and not as mere means. It is these characteristics that determine the existence of concrete ends, regardless of the way in which the objects are used.

2 SEARCHING A MODERN SELF IN AN ONLIFE WORLD

In the early 20th century, the Japanese writer Natsume Sōseki was invited by a major Japanese educational institution to give a lecture to graduating students who would either enter the labour market or continue their studies at university. In this lecture, later published as an essay entitled “My individualism” [私の故人主], the author looks back on his own life and professional career. According to him, the thing that had the biggest impact on his life was his relationship with the West. This cultural tradition had taught him, from his earliest contacts, the importance of selfhood. He stated the following in reference to these first contacts: “the conviction

that I acquired at that time, that the ego is the essential ingredient and that others are merely secondary, brings me today great self-confidence and a deep feeling of peace. It seems as if it is what allows me, even now, to continue to live. In fact, it is perhaps thanks to this strength that I can stand on this platform and give you this lecture” 7.

Japan’s collective and community-based cultural tradition exerted a pressure on individuals that was sometimes difficult to bear. It is for this reason that Sōseki valued Western individualism. The Western ‘self’ allowed him to be himself, and this was a great relief to him. He could deal with failure and wasn’t concerned about others turning their back on him and leaving him, for whatever reason, alone and isolated. Even in these circumstances of abandonment, there was still something worthy of appreciation. His ‘self’ had value in and of itself, and this gave Sōseki a great security. It is not that he stopped being responsible for others and the role that he would have been allocated by his community. Rather, this responsibility became a decision instead of something that was imposed upon him, and that was important. Indeed, it is the ability to choose, to act not because one is forced to but because one wants to, that is one of the most salient and valued characteristics of the modern ‘self’. However, this decision, in order to be one’s own, required awareness, thought and reflection. On the topic of self-reflection, Hannah Arendt stated that “even though I am one, I am not simply one, I have a self and I am related to this self as my own self. This self is by no means an illusion; it makes itself heard by talking to me – I talk to myself, I am not only aware of myself – and in this sense, though I am one, I am two-in-one and there can be harmony or disharmony with the self” 8. If I want to be at peace with myself, I will do what is right. One’s dialogue with oneself is the basis of the moral conscience that limits freedom. This is what makes it so important.

However, this dialogue does not take place automatically. It is necessary to learn how to talk with yourself, and there is no other way than experimenting with times and spaces of solitude. It is no coincidence that, at the beginning of the 17th century, the first rooms for individual use began to appear in houses 9 and that people started keeping personal diaries 10. Just as the Ancient and Middle Ages had recognised the public sphere as the fundamental sphere of human expression, the Modern Age felt that this was best achieved in the private sphere. As Béjar argued, in Modernity, “the conception of the private, founded on the idealisation of the individual as the receptacle of freedom, [will be] understood simultaneously as self-development and autonomy” 11. However, “private life has to be made, it has to be conquered. It is not enough to exist in order to have it” 12, as we suggested earlier in this paper. As the years went on, selfhood was increasingly cultivated until the arrival of the bourgeois era. It was the bourgeoisie of the 19th century that was most concerned with educating private life. The bourgeoisie promoted reading and individual study in their children, and also encouraged them to keep a personal diary. Solitude was considered a virtue, since personal reflection was necessary in order to always act with autonomy and responsibility 13.

This changed at the end of the 19th century. Education became democratised and started to be seen as more than an end of human development and expression. Rather, it was viewed as a means of forming individuals who would prove to be useful for the labour

market and the wider society. A new middle class gradually emerged whose aim would be to reach the material living standard of the bourgeoisie, but without considering the spiritual aspects of this way of life. The end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century would bring with it what José Ortega y Gasset called the 'mass-man': "the average man. In this way what was mere quantity – the multitude – is converted into a qualitative determination: it becomes the common social quality, man as undifferentiated from other men, but as repeating in himself a generic type" 14. In other words, an individual who was driven by inertia, who did not think for himself and who was only concerned with his material well-being. This would continue until after the Second World War where a consumer society was taking shape which, by the late 20th century, some intellectuals would define as "vacuous" 15. There was no community, no deep relationship between individuals; just loneliness and consumption.

The 'self', unlike what Sōseki learned from the West, no longer provided security. Only work and material wellbeing could provide this security, and this is what individuals fought for. In the 2000s, and particularly since the creation of web 2.0 16 and the emergence of social networks and education and communication technologies, it seemed that this might change. Cyberspace was presented as a place where community could be created. While as means they have helped to organise and promote the most significant movements of recent years 17, they have also meant that, in a generalised way, "we experience widespread feelings of emptiness, of disconnection, of the unreality of self" 18. To avoid this, the current trend is to develop good practice guidelines that avoid addiction, overexposure, causing virtual harm to others or any practices that might hinder the correct development of an autonomous, self-confident and empowered 'self' in terms of both thought and behaviour 19. However, despite these countermeasures, the negative effects of online life continue to exist. Perhaps this is because we do not pay enough attention to the fact that digital technologies are more than simple means.

3 DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES: BETWEEN MEANS AND ENDS

Whether for their ubiquity, their attractiveness or their ability to facilitate our daily routine, few things remain untouched by the influence of modern-day technological devices 20. While technology has accompanied human beings throughout their development and evolution as a species, the truth is that we are currently living in the most technological society that has ever existed. However, the ingenuity that allowed us to develop modern-day technology appears to have lagged behind in fully grasping the magnitude of the changes that it has brought about in recent decades. This should come as no surprise, since modern technological developments have generated a strong and rapid wave of transformations in all areas of life, which even affect human nature 21. The evolution and development of modern technologies have allowed us to delegate work and competences to these digital devices and tools which, until now, had been the responsibility of the human being 22. We no longer need to memorise data. Rather, information accompanies us wherever we want it: we have it in the palm of our hand in the form of our smartphones. What we want to highlight with this example is that, just as the emergence of the industrial robot not

only changed production but also redefined the meaning of work, ICT is not only changing the way we interact with each other, but it is also redefining our way of life and the way we inhabit the world 23. While our adaptation to the digital environment initially seemed like the conquest of a new space - the online space - it is actually digital technologies that are conquering us. Along these lines, 24 argues that the current technological (r)evolution is of such a magnitude that it is bringing about a re-ontologisation of our world. Societal progress depends on technologies that are capable of escaping our control, because the way in which information flows through them, as well as their degree of autonomy, often allows them to act independently of any human interaction. This is why 25 states that we have become inforgs, which are simple interconnected organisms. This concept not only alludes to the human being as a biological agent, but it also refers to technological devices characterised by the possession and connection of a large amount of information. It is a connection that goes beyond the "internet of things" or "ubiquitous computing". We are talking about experiencing an 'onlife', in which it is increasingly difficult to escape the hyper-connectivity of these devices and tools. In other words, it is becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish between the online and offline spheres.

All these changes require us to (re)consider and address the technical and cognitive status that we attribute to this technology. In the field of education, we have long been accustomed to introducing ICT as a means, without realising that these technologies have direct implications irrespective of the way in which we use them. We have focused exclusively on the potential benefits or drawbacks of their right or wrong use, overlooking the fact that these technologies themselves bring with them both positive and negative constraints from which we cannot easily escape. This superficial approach means that the conception of ICT in the field of education is merely didactic or instrumental 26, 27. Turning to Twitter, for example, to find out about current affairs is not necessarily harmful. However, it's true that this social network shows us information that is generated based on preferences and tastes that are determined by the user's browsing algorithm. All social networks allow us to expose our 'self' in a way that had previously been inconceivable. Social networks, based on the way in which they have been developed, thus interfere in the construction of our private lives. As much as these platforms have privacy policies, public exposure remains their *raison d'être*. This makes it difficult for younger generations to learn the value of privacy, secrecy, solitude and so on. These social networks also allow us to show our authentic 'self' as well as the best version of ourselves - even if this version is detached from reality, as is the case with many influencers. Not only that, but they also make it difficult for us to adapt our discourse to socially shared norms. The 'self' that we show to our family is different to the one we show our friends, boss or teachers. The problem arises, however, when social networks force us to imagine a single audience of family, friends, teachers and bosses, and thus adapt - or self-censor - our identity according to how others view us. The same means that offers something as positive as social interactions is simultaneously forcing us into a highly-limiting collapse 28.

4 CONCLUSIONS

We have provided just a few examples of how our 'self' is permeated by ICT and cyberspace, regardless of the way in which we use them. ICT provides us with a range of new spaces to inhabit, while its high degree of autonomy has a profound impact on the way in which we communicate, interpret and transform our environment. In this sense, we have highlighted the extent to which the modern technologies are not simple neutral means, and have shown the downsides to using them as if they were. It is difficult to escape, therefore, the influence that digital technologies have on our lives. It is precisely this technology-generated hyper-connectivity that seems to be to blame for hindering the maintenance of the modern 'self'. It is becoming increasingly difficult for us to find private spaces where we can enjoy time alone; where we can establish a dialogue with ourselves. Instead, our internal dialogue becomes an overexposure of our 'self' in the form of images and posts on our social media profiles.

However, we should not necessarily take this new reality as something negative; it is not about reclaiming the modern 'self' in a world that does not allow it. In order to be able to lead a healthy and, above all, fully human 'onlife', we should focus on thinking about what kind of individuals we want to be and, ultimately, be aware of the intrinsic characteristics of the technologies we use. As educators, the first thing we should do is to think about which educational and pedagogical principles are worthy of preservation, because education is an end in its own right 29. Once we have done this, it is then a question of how to achieve these principles without abandoning the real world in which we live. Despite the fact that certain pedagogical trends advocate a more decontextualised and universalised approach to education, the breadth of human diversity means that mistakes continue to be made in their analyses 30. In a generalised way, addressing our current context will force us to address ICT, considering that these technologies also contain ends in themselves. This will also force us to analyse the extent to which these ends fit or do not fit in with our pedagogical principles. If they do not fit, it will be time for educators to ask technology providers for materials that are respectful of their educational and pedagogical ends. It is technology that has to be pedagogised and not education that has to be technologised, as has been traditionally felt within the academic field of education.

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