DIGITAL EDUCATION:
the key to success in the 21st century

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By 2030, not less than 80% of EU citizens should have at least a basic level of digital literacy. This is the target of the EU programme setting the course for digital transformation in Europe. What is the situation like today? Monika Karwacka, PhD, a member of the Digital Humanities Team at the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Silesia in Katowice, talks about the digital skills of young people, the use of AI in the classroom, and the role of teachers.

At the end of 2023, Eurostat published a digital competence report. 56% of European Union citizens aged 16-74 possess at least some basic digital skills. The highest percentage was recorded in the Netherlands (83%), Finland (82%), and Denmark (70%) and the lowest in Romania (28%), Bulgaria (36%), and Poland (44%). These figures do not inspire optimism given the role digitality plays in our lives – there is no denying that we live in two parallel worlds: the real one and the virtual one. Puzzling is the fact that many young people do not know how to use online resources. Social media seems to be the exception; students navigate it flawlessly.

'The biggest problem is the ability to obtain and process information, verify it, and use it for educational purposes. I see it constantly when working with students', says M. Karwacka, PhD.

Young people don't know where and how to look for information. The first and often only step they take is to type the search term into Google. In the era of the rapid development of artificial intelligence, there is also the opinion that you can just enter the topic into ChatGPT and you will receive a ready-made paper. Nothing could be more wrong. You have to think carefully how to ask the right question to get a satisfactory result, react to the answers, and also verify them because artificial intelligence has a unique tendency to bend the truth and invent facts.

'I once conducted an experiment and asked ChatGPT to impersonate a scientist and write an article on a given topic and provide a bibliography. I got a text in which most of the sources were fictional. It looked beautiful though! But it turned out that the papers written by AI were substantively off-base', admits M. Karwacka, PhD.

Scientists specialising in their field are able to spot made-up publications with ease. However, students rarely verify information produced by artificial intelligence, taking it at face value. Many teachers approach AI with great resentment because they believe it will increase cheating. It is therefore crucial to teach young people how to use digital tools responsibly, so that they help them with their work and do not replace independent thinking.

'ChatGPT is an incredible tool that can save you a lot of time. However, you need to know, among other things, how to formulate the question properly. It teaches inventiveness, critical thinking, problem solving, and creativity. Digital tools are perfect to develop these competencies. We, as teachers and lecturers, should support students who need our guidance in this regard', notes the scientist.

Introducing young people (and not only them) to online safety is important as well. These days, it is a priority. Our society still seems to be very ignorant in this area, e.g. we tend to use passwords that are way too simple (e.g. '123456', 'admin') and we often use a single password for multiple platforms.

There is a strong resistance to technology among teachers, with few using digital tools in their work. According to EU reports, less than 40% of educators are interested in digital education. Classes often take a passive form – students listen and take notes. However, M. Karwacka, PhD emphasises that digital education should not serve as the replacement for traditional classes, but should make them more attractive.

The possibilities are vast – there is a lot of web content that meets the needs of the modern world. Teachers share various applications and lesson plans. EU websites and non-profit organisations make it possible to learn about good digital practices. Participating in training sessions organised, among others, by the USil Digital Humanities Team is at the very least worth considering. Through a variety of methods, students can develop their creativity and freedom of thought by creating projects, podcasts, multimedia exhibitions, and even family trees. Digital tools can be used in any subject: English, chemistry, biology, or mathematics. It's a matter of creativity and teaching approach.

'I would like to encourage teachers to look for interesting ideas on how to change our teaching process. It's convenient to teach in the same way for years, but it just not good enough anymore. The greatest satisfaction in teaching comes when our students are doing well in the job market', concludes M. Karwacka, PhD.