

# Humanities Education in the Times of Expanding Use of Digital Technology

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*The paper addresses the current situation in humanities education in the context of the domination of new technologies and, in particular, promising opportunities and real risks digitalization processes. The authors emphasize the importance of the crucial differentiation between knowledge and thinking. The focus is on the nature of education as irreducible merely to transmitting the existing disciplinary knowledge in humanities and social sciences. Expanding the scope of anonymity in public space, when the authority of a philosophical statement is lost, presupposes a clarification of the ethical and academic criteria of scientific and educational activities. There is a necessity to challenge and overcome the tradition of relying on principles of thinking developed in the European intellectual tradition and perceived in the 20th century as contributing to a deep crisis. The new approach to thinking demands the departure from the conventional perception of language, the author argues in the paper.*

*Keywords: philosophy of education, knowledge, thinking, language, metaphor, mission of universities*

## INTRODUCTION

The issue of digitalization and its significance for humanities education is far from being merely one among a multitude of issues one needs to address in the trying times. It can become an emergency issue regarding how one responds to the challenges of education that are destined to stimulate human creativity. The emergence of new technologies, which allows one to convert various activities into the digital format, inevitably raises expectations regarding their applicability in educational practices and transmitting knowledge more efficiently. It means that people have new opportunities at their disposal, unavailable until now, that can provide them with the instruments of converting the content of education into a more transmittable form.

However, as the very nature of human being is decisively determined by its relation to language, as has been put forward already by the ancient Greeks defining humans as “language-speaking-animals,” one is confronted in this context with a challenge compared with the one humankind has been experiencing during the invention of writing and printing. These inventions have been so dramatically transformative in their nature that they have profoundly shaken the previously established traditional norms of human behavior and humans themselves. It is why the invention of writing has been met with extreme caution from the times of Plato as it has been expressed particularly in his “Phaedrus” dialog and in the “Seventh Letter” (McLuhan, 1962; Mikhailov, 2016, 2020; Powel, 2013; Pruzhinin, Arlamov, Azhimov & Dankova, 2018). In both cases, the question has been raised on the necessity of hermeneutical interpretation and revitalization of the meaning contained in fixed texts.

This concern, widely spread in the European intellectual tradition of the 20th century, means that the peoples' thinking cannot be reduced to speculation in the predominantly intellectual form of knowledge with which one is familiar, and which presupposes the use of strictly abstract logical procedures to all spheres of life. Such thinking does not function autonomously without the involvement of the wholeness of human beings with their emotional and imaginative capacities and subsequent needs of appropriating means of their expression.

In these circumstances, the understanding of language as the totality of a fixed system of signs and systematically built and employed theoretical constructs, which respectively makes possible the usage of a universal and instrumental sign-behavior of humans, becomes highly questionable. Expressing the totality of the human experience is always *individual* and cannot rely on the anonymity of language articulated in signs that transmit meanings in mathematics and natural sciences (Mikhailov, 2016). The lived human experience always conveys the *uniqueness* of a particular situation of a life-world that cannot be analyzed in linguistic generalities. It implies presenting the “way of talking, eating, concluding treaties, engaging in commerce, dancing, gesturing, tying shoelaces, building ships, explaining the past, worshipping God, permeated by some common quality which cannot be analyzed in terms of an instance of general laws or effects or discoverable causes, recurrent uniformities, repetitions which allow the common element to be abstracted and sometimes experimented upon” (Berlin, 1996).

It is well-known that in this context, Hannah Arendt follows Heidegger's questioning of the very nature of thinking as shown in the epigraph to her *opus magnum* – “The Life of the Mind”: “Thinking does not bring knowledge as do the sciences. Thinking does not produce usable, practical wisdom. Thinking does not solve the riddles of the universe. Thinking does not endow us directly with power to act.” In doing this, she does not only radicalize Kant's principal distinction between thinking and knowledge. Particularly in her “Denktagebuch 1950–1973,” she elaborates on an enlarged approach to thinking without reducing it to sterile contemplative activity. She is doing that by emphasizing the importance of a metaphor that, according to her opinion, connects thinking with the *poetic* activity (*Dichten*): “What connects thinking and poetic activity (*Dichten*) is the metaphor” (Arendt, 2002). She further provides multiple formulations in support of the decisive role of the metaphor, insisting that metaphors “guarantee the unity of human experience” and help achieve “the unity of the world” (Arendt, 2002). Among other things, this emphasis on the importance of the metaphor reminds one of the ancient notions of *poiesis*, which emphasizes the human activity and helps comprehend that it is through thinking in metaphors that one is “transferring” (*metapherein*) words to concepts that can establish correspondence between ourselves and the world practically. She adds in “The life of the mind” in her remarkable interpretation of the insights of Kant's “Critique of judgment” that only “the metaphor provides the abstract, imageless thought with an intuition drawn from the world of appearances whose function it is to establish the reality of our concepts” (Arendt, 1958, 1978). One must keep in mind that Arendt's insights into the nature of thinking and its transformation through metaphors are not merely motivated by her academic interests. She addresses this issue within the context of her painful discovery of the phenomenon of total absence of thinking in totalitarianism, and she does not refer this phenomenon exclusively to the tragic German past.

However, the new approach to thinking that does not presuppose the existence of its content in an autonomous form independent of language and confidence in finding the exact expression assigned in advance to each thought by the language of things themselves demands the departure from the conventional perception of language as determined by linguistics and the philosophy of language [14]. The way to such a language, not reduced to conceptuality, includes lived experience (*Erlebnis*) articulated through the arts. Because of this trend in the Western intellectual tradition, “the twentieth century has been characterized as the century of language” (Powel, 2013).

It allows one to conclude that improvements in technology with its increasing automation initiate a trajectory of “technologizing” personality experience and contribute to the de-skilling of human capacities.

The question of the possibility of expressing one's thoughts in a digital form opens for further discussion. It is up to humans now how they will deal with this powerful instrument of digitalization while being confronted with extremely challenging issues of education in the field of humanities.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The concept of a method cannot be universal. The repeatability of the result as a criterion of accuracy appears to be satisfactory only in natural scientific knowledge. Things get much more complicated if one is dealing with education in the area of social sciences and humanities. The temptation to apply similar teaching methods also inevitably fails since one is dealing with a different type of activities not exactly rendered by the English term “education” but rather by the German “Bildung.” The meaning expressed by this term, usually related to the ideas of Wilhelm von Humboldt, though widely acknowledged, is becoming increasingly less efficient in its practical application even in the tradition where it has been cultivated for almost two centuries (Mikhailov, 2009).

The research goal is to objectively analyze the current situation in liberal arts education when the dominance of new digital technologies becomes undisputed. The assessment of promising opportunities and real risks of digitalization in the framework of academic communication associates with the factor mentioned above. To achieve this goal, one should solve the following tasks: analyzing the fundamental differences between the concepts of “knowledge” and “thinking,” defining the functions of disciplinary knowledge in the humanities and social sciences and exploring ethical criteria for scientific and educational activities.

The idea of Bildung interpreted as “upbringing,” the “activity of forming,” has always been the most elusive and extremely challenging issue. With their successes and failures, all theories and practices applied in this field do not allow themselves to be fixed in absolute forms ready for application. More than any other type of knowledge, social sciences and humanities derive from the articulation of the “facticity” (Heidegger) of human life and express the richness of its experience. Since no formal or artificial language allows one to convey such experience and since the analytic tradition early programs of purifying the meaning from its ambiguities appear to be unsuccessful, one is inevitably constrained to use the common language and even discover that the multiplicity of its meanings indicates not only its deficiency.

## RESULTS

From the 20th century, people have inherited a very confused and fragmented perception of the nature of a human being. It has resulted in increasing atomization of knowledge on the people, fragmentation of personality, and mistaking the importance of parts for the whole. Vast scientific efforts are devoted to exploring human life – anthropology, psychology, sociology, political science, linguistics, medicine, and economics. Additionally, all these disciplines utilize their specific terminology not always based on sharing agreed-upon principles but on the illusionary basic assumption that there is such a thing as one human nature established for the time. In this context, the existing enthusiasm around exploiting the growing demand for digital instruments in education too often takes the form of providing purely informative knowledge consisting of ready-to-use schemas, formulas, and recipes that pretend to solve life issues through substituting such sort of “knowledge” for the ability to stimulate thinking (Pruzhinin et al., 2018).

It means that one is still not able to learn the lessons from the warnings widely spread in the 20th century and described as the “inner crisis of thinking,” a crisis that is not comparable “to any other that has occurred in Europe’s past” (Ortega y Gasset, 1963). Joining other great thinkers of the 20th century, the author of “The revolt of the masses,” José Ortega y Gasset, has identified it as the “crisis of the foundations.” He emphasizes that it has occurred alongside the crisis “in the three exemplary sciences: Mathematics, Physics, and Logics” and has turned into a crisis that “has arisen in the general attitude of humans toward thinking as such” (Ortega y Gasset, 1963). In this context, Ortega y Gasset refers to the alarming statement of the founder of the phenomenological movement Edmund Husserl, one of the greatest proponents of confidence in reason. He proclaimed in 1929 that European sciences lost the “great faith” in themselves and in their absolute meaning, which previously was founded in myth and religious faith. Ortega y Gasset quotes the dramatic conclusion from Husserl’s renowned book “The crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology”: “We now live in a world that has become incomprehensible to us, a world

in which people strive in vain to find the purpose and the meaning of their doing that have once been so clearly known and fully acknowledged by intellect and will” (Ortega y Gasset, 1963).

While addressing the issue of the crisis in education in the context of a more general crisis and instability in modern society, Hannah Arendt has shared similar concerns in the context of her reflections on the dangerous trends in the education of the 20th century. According to her analysis, at the time when “we have lost the answers on which we ordinarily rely without even realizing that they were originally answers to questions, instead, we respond to a crisis, which ‘becomes a disaster,’ by relying on our preformed judgments, that is, with prejudices” (Arendt, 2006).

## DISCUSSION

Going digital? Experience versus knowledge with all its exciting potential, current technology continues to affect all spheres of human life, simultaneously contributing to the depersonalization and dehumanization of an individual. Without questioning the impressive achievements of current technology, Albert Borgmann writes in his “Technology and the character of contemporary life” book that “the reduction of work in technology to a mere means has resulted in the degradation of most work to what I usually call labor” (Borgmann, 1984). It means that improvements in technology with its increasing automation initiate a trajectory of “technologizing” experience and contribute to the de-skilling of human capacities. In this context, regarding Martin Heidegger’s “The question concerning technology,” he concludes that there is a new “tendency to make everything as flexible as possible that has led us to digitalize and interconnect as much reality as we can” (Borgmann, 1984).

In this work, Heidegger famously raises the issue of technology as a new type of activity that should be perceived as “the supreme danger” resulting from the fact that the contemporary human “exalt themselves and posture as lords of Earth” due to their belief “that everything the human encounters exists only insofar as it is their construct.” As a result, concludes Heidegger, “precisely nowhere does human today and longer encounter themselves, i.e., their essence” (Heidegger, 1993). Tracing back the evolution of this relationship of human and reality in the European intellectual tradition and recognizing the danger of distortion of the sensuous being-in-the-world, Heidegger, among other things, pays attention to the fact that even for Plato, the use of the word *idea* does not intend to name “only the nonsensuous aspect of what is physically visible. Aspect (*idea*) names and also is that which constitutes the essence of in the audible, the tasteable, the tactile, in any everything that is in any way accessible” (Heidegger, 1993). This negligence of the bodily and sensuous presence in the world becomes fixed since the Cartesian division between the mind and the body and the Kantian appreciation of understanding (*Verstand*) at the expense of sensibility. It determines the whole tradition of perceiving knowledge in its autonomy and universal confidence in its application to natural and human reality. Thinking that is reduced to such knowledge and formulated in a corresponding language remains foundational to education and might get a new boost with entering the Internet era.

In his insightful book “On the Internet,” Hubert Dreyfus presents an impressive analysis of opportunities and risks connected with such an attitude to the new format of educational practices. “We should remain open to the possibility that, when we enter cyberspace and leave behind our emotional, intuitive, situated, vulnerable, embodied selves, and thereby gain remarkable new freedom never before available to human beings, we might, at the same time, necessarily lose some of our crucial capacities: our ability to make sense of things so as to distinguish the relevant from the irrelevant, our sense of the seriousness of success and failure that is necessary for learning, and our need to get a maximum grip on the world that gives us sense of reality of things. Furthermore, we would be tempted to avoid the risk of genuine commitment, and so lose our sense of what gives meaning to our lives” (Dreyfus, 2009). The positioning in the sphere of digital reality has the potential of distancing from the everyday world with all its inevitably risky situations and deprives one of being embedded in a world, thus creating a false impression of the possibility to avoid the uncertainty and instability of lives with an illusory promise to overcome it. In this context, Dreyfus pays attention to the danger of ignoring and even of breaking down the “human-human interaction” that has developed in the course of human evolution, and that is based on “a subtle combination

of eye movements, head motion, gesture, and posture” (Dreyfus, 2009). The nature of a human being and reality that is the subject of knowledge expressed in digital form can be perceived as existing “in a perfect internal homogeneity and an absolute essential purity” (Beistegui, 2004). It possesses an inevitable impact on students’ behavior exposed to the exciting world of opportunities opened by the digital world.

In his comments on the publication in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* of September 2007 stating that “communication among students actually gets livelier when they assume digital personae,” Hubert Dreyfus raises his doubts of the fact “that the relatively disembodied students each alone in front of their computer and represented in the virtual classroom by an avatar can become as involved in the risky process of shared learning as can embodied students learning together in a classroom in the real world. If discussions are livelier when the students meet as digital personages, it seems to me that this must be because they were only half-alive before” (Dreyfus, 2009).

## CONCLUSION

The decisive issue is how to pay attention to this issue in the situation of a growing demand for education that is perceived not only as providing knowledge that allegedly already exists in the ready-made form but how to address education in the sphere of humanities as a transformative potential vis-a-vis the growing expansion of imitative educational initiatives. This phenomenon is far from being a new one. In December 1968, Arendt wrote with great concern on the situation in education, “Universities are institutions of mass society. Many jobs are available due to the growing number of students. It means that the student-teacher community of knowledge and truth has ceased to exist. People are hired not because they can add to knowledge but because they are needed as teachers. The “research” is hypocritical, superfluous, and utterly irrelevant to knowledge and job alike. The masses of papers suffocate scholarship and originality. The “publish or perish” device was vulgar originally. Currently, it is an undoubted danger to all serious efforts (Arendt, 2002). Since 1968 the situation has not only not improved but even deteriorated. Therefore, it needs to be addressed by the academic community with the appropriate courage of self-critical attitude and readiness to overcome the Ivory Tower of remaining in the sphere of fixed theoretical knowledge (Ortega y Gasset, 1968).

The very nature of human beings is not simply *to be* in the world believing in their ability to master it but to become able to respond to its challenges through their behavior creatively. All organic life, including animals, exists adapting to its environment. Animals are provided by their evolution with a fixed genetic code for everything needed in their living and are not provoked to go beyond it. The substitution of the absence of this innate capacity by creativity should be carefully cultivated through various processes of human development, including education. If this task will be properly understood, there is a hope that the growing anonymity of the intellectual environment – a phenomenon predicted by Søren Kierkegaard already in 1846 in his famous publication “The present age” and closely followed by many others, for example, Robert Musil’s “The man without qualities,” José Ortega y Gasset’s “The revolt of the masses,” Giorgio Agamben’s “The man without content,” etc. – can again draw one’s attention to the similar developments in the current reality (Goodstein, 2005). The authors are aware that this concern over the anonymization of the nature of the human being has been raised at a time when there has been no indication of the Internet or of the possibility to express thoughts in a digital form even on the horizon. It is up to humans now how they will deal with this powerful instrument of digitalization while being confronted with extremely challenging issues of education in the field of humanities.

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