

Envisioning Education in a Digital Society

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As technologies develop, their availability becomes perceived as a necessity of life, and supplying them becomes something akin to a moral and, frequently, a political imperative. For example, making Internet connectivity widely available is increasingly seen as something like the satisfaction of a human need, to the extent that work, education, socializing and leisure require connectivity (Hansen, 2020 p. 89).

Envisioning Education in a Digital Society, the CIES 2025 conference theme, is inspired by rapid transformations taking place due to technological advancements (e.g., Generative Artificial Intelligence, the Internet of Things, and Connectivity Technologies) that are reshaping our daily lives, the future of work and our society, all of which have profound impacts on education. These advancements bring complex challenges, including the adoption of technology in educational settings, *ethical concerns*, and the new *digital divide* that technologies can create. Moreover, the growth of connectivity and the widespread use of devices and digital applications are pushing forward digital transformations in education at a rapid pace.

The 21st Century means that learners, educators and administrators find themselves immersed in a range of digital cultures. For learners, these present new opportunities such as connecting with peers, enhancing learning opportunities, increasing access to educational resources, fostering greater creativity and self-expression, and increasing exposure to different cultures. For educators, administrators and others, it means thinking through concerns over the challenges faced by the omnipresence of digital technology in our everyday lives, including ethical concerns around consent, privacy, security, inclusion, fairness, protection from online harm, transparency and accountability. A key characteristic of '21st-Century children' (Burns & Gottschalk, 2019) is their 'hyper-connectedness' (Brubaker, 2022) from an early age, and the potential risks. When we talk about digital technology, we often assume a causal relationship between technology and certain effects on society and how we live our lives. In thinking about learners' uses of digital technology, the idea of causality becomes augmented and, as we have often seen, paired with concerns about how these technologies might create spaces for new harms from too much *screen time* to exploitative behavior. Equally discussions about *fake news*, *media literacy* and *digital competencies* have led to a need for envisioning what education is and can be. The conference theme not only challenges us to discover, examine, evaluate and/or propose a possible, probable, and preferable future of education, but it also asks us to envision *what we are doing and why we do things the way we do?*

Digital technologies are also increasingly a vital component of socio-economic developments. With the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) informing the global development agenda, local, national, supranational, and private organizations direct new and emerging technologies as ways to pursue and reach global development targets, from poverty reduction and access to health, education and social protection. An increased focus on data-for-development (D4D) brings forth a new phase in the history of ICT for Development (ICT4D). Yet, calls are also made by AI activists and scholars for 'data justice', including the fair and ethical treatment around the collection, processing and use of data for individuals and communities (Arora, 2019), especially in the Global South. These activists and scholars are concerned with ensuring that data used to train AI systems is fair for everyone and do not misrepresent,

discriminate or alienate those already at the margins when it comes to education and societal opportunities (Arora, 2024; Benjamin, 2019).

As digital technology increasingly has significant impacts on our society, some of the trends, we as an educational community may be concerned with, are the increasing use of i) digital devices and technologies in education; ii) production of data (from the use of these digital devices), and iii) existing produced data to improve, understand, and personalize the learning process, and more generally, various aspects of the educational operation. Simultaneously, there are policy implications that should be considered, such as how do and how might countries address the policy and cultural challenges associated with digitalization to reduce some of the challenges while also reaping the benefits? And what new challenges should be put on their policy agenda and how can these be addressed? Moreover, with the rise of platform capitalism, we should perhaps be concerned with who the driving actors are, and how they are transforming the educational landscape.

Public debates about new digital technologies have been raging since the 1970s (Tichenor et al., 1970) regarding digital transformations as well as the digital divides caused by them. Concerns have been raised about the consequences of the digital divide which can lead to new forms of social disadvantage and/or inequality (Helsper, 2021; Datta et al., 2019; Goggin, 2019; Wong et al., 2015). The COVID-19 pandemic and the unprecedented worldwide health emergency associated with it acted as an accelerator leading to a paradigm shift and a series of digital transformations around the world, which saw the disruption of education systems affecting nearly 1.6 billion learners in more than 200 countries. While digital technology allowed for the delivery of education during the closures of schools, training institutes and higher education in most countries, concerns have also been raised that this led to an *ed-tech tragedy* (UNESCO, 2023) specifically regarding *connectivity*, *content* and *capacities* where “the experiences of school closures during COVID-19 offered a preview of what the world might look like if the digital transformation of education is carried to extremes” (UNESCO, 2023 p. 24). For many children, school closures meant that their home became their classrooms, leading to increased parental involvement in children's education, emphasising new and unfamiliar roles of parents during the COVID-19 pandemic.

CIES 2025 offers us the opportunity to focus on these issues and ask questions of ourselves, including what are the experiences of learners and educators as digital technology is increasingly influencing our society? How do we include these experiences in our understanding of how we might envision education with or without digital technology at the forefront? How can we envision teaching and teacher education in a digital society? How can the more recent and rapidly evolving landscape of education support student learning across the globe? How can we adapt to rapid developments showcased in the ever-increasing presence of AI and datafication in and of education that are still young and can be described as stories of trial and error? Thus, sharing our experiences, expectations, and hopes is vital, and CIES 2025 seeks to engage in these spaces to support learning across the world. The digital revolution has ushered in exciting, promising, and imaginative changes, but it is also testing our beliefs about learning and education and the need to envision what the future might hold.