

Chapter XXXII

An Ethical Perspective on ICT in the Context of the Other

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ABSTRACT

The importance of incorporating an ethical perspective in the development of digital competence is discussed. It is argued that an ethical perspective that emphasises mutual understanding as a possible conception of democracy is of importance in the light of the current global e-learning trend, especially when it comes to designing e-learning ventures as online learning communities.

INTRODUCTION

During the last decade, one of the most significant changes for the way we educate, teach and learn has been the Internet. Today, this is a development that is probably the most expansive in tertiary education. In the formation of a global education system, the building of virtual learning environments and the deployment of e-learning has become a substantial part of the educational practice. Having access to education is then also about having access to the technological skills

that otherwise leaves the practitioner behind. In the recommendations from the European Union (EU) about future goals for the educational system, the importance of having competence in using Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) is stressed. For future European citizens, having key competencies in this field is crucial, according to the EU (ET 2010 WP, p. 3), for at least three aspects of life:

for personal fulfilment and development throughout life (cultural capital): key competences must

enable people to pursue individual objectives in life, driven by personal interests, aspirations and the desire to continue learning throughout life; b. active citizenship and inclusion (social capital): key competences should allow everybody to participate as an active citizen in society; c. employability (human capital): the capacity of each and every person to obtain a decent job in the labour market.

Formulated this way, these aspects of key competencies point towards several important areas where the use of ICT for education, learning and for promoting democracy seems vital. Nevertheless, they are all aspects that seem to be articulated without any deeper concern for what neither an ethical perspective on education nor the use of ICT within education might imply, nor what an ethical perspective might imply in terms of democracy.

Democracy and education have been closely aligned for a long time. Having a well-educated and skilled population was a driving force behind the Swedish compulsory school-system. It was an attempt at creating a stable society. This base for a democratic component in education has had several proponents over time. In the early 20th century, Dewey (1916) gave voice to a need for a democratic view of education. In the later parts of the century, education was put forth by Freire (1972) as an emancipatory issue. In these two views the link between education and democracy is obvious. But this aspect of education has not been un-challenged. In the educational system there have been several examples of a contradictory view (Bernstein, 2000), that education as such conforms and disciplines its subjects. Education then becomes an ideological formation of the human being, a transformation into a certain pre-determined ways of understanding the world. These are issues with an interesting touch of ambiguity; access to education could be a democratic issue as well as an ideological for-

mation into something already given, issues that easily lend themselves to further thought as they become contextualised in the knowledge society. Will for example the democratizing affordances of the Internet win out, or will the result be new forms of control?

What could it mean, then, to be a democratic person engaged in democratic processes? A part of the answer lies in conceptualising democracy. According to Held (1996, p. 297), democracy entails “a form of politics and life in which there are fair and just ways of negotiating values and value disputes.” Democracy, as Held views it, tries to re-conceptualise and reconcile a concern with individual and collective self-determination in which ‘autonomy’ or ‘independence’ are central. Self-consciousness, self-reflection, and self-determination, with opportunities for deliberation, choice, judgement, and action, are all aspects of autonomy.

If one accepts autonomy as a principle related to democracy, a democratic person is someone who is preoccupied with making choices, with the freedom to determine and justify actions of their own. It would also include the skills and resources they need to take advantage of opportunities before them. This view of the democratic person places the individual at the core of democracy. Democracy based on the ideal of autonomy becomes that quality which serves to regulate the behaviour of the individual in relation to others.

But then there is also a need in this chapter to provide for a discussion concerning the possibility to understand humans and their dispositions in relation to others, a discussion that will have to focus on the human condition of being human as well as on the ethical aspects that it might imply. Ethics, Lévinas (1969) tells us, is the first philosophy and as such it precedes ontology and epistemology. Thereby an ethical perspective is needed to understand humans and their disposition, whether they are gender, cultural, ethnical, or social, in a situation, in which they are given

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