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DIGITAL PAIDEIA OR TEACHING PHILOSOPHY IN MCLUHAN GALAXY: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

*If we teach today
as we taught yesterday,
we rob our children of
tomorrow. - John Dewey*

Abstract: *The new generation of young digital individuals exhibits cognitive patterns largely shaped by the media ontology of their time, along with their constant engagement with digital technology. Digital media and internet connectivity establish a new ontology, derived from the Latin ubiquitas, meaning omnipresence and existence everywhere. This digital ubiquity—enabled by the internet, virtual reality, social networks, gaming consoles, rapid information exchange, smart mobile devices, artificial intelligence, and other immersive environments—profoundly transforms young people. In this text, we aim to explore the challenges, difficulties, and opportunities philosophy professors face when engaging with this new generation.*

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*Specifically, we will discuss the significance of philosophical education in the digital era, drawing on Marshall McLuhan's book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. We will also examine the emergence of a radically new digital environment, where today's youth differ significantly from those for whom the traditional educational system was originally designed. Furthermore, we will consider how philosophical pedagogy can be reimagined to align with the possibilities offered by digital technology. Our central thesis is that philosophy educators must adapt the classroom to the digital world in which students now live. Philosophical pedagogy must transform digital technology into a didactic tool; otherwise, none of the educational and functional objectives of philosophy teaching will be achievable.*

Keywords: *philosophy teaching, e-people, digital natives, digital ubiquity, digital paideia, McLuhan galaxy*

Introduction

In recent years, we have been intensely engaged in the study of philosophical methodology and humanistic education within the context of technological innovations. We have written about philosophical methodology in the networked society and digital didactics,² developed several manuals, and conducted

² Б. Карацов, Б. "Paideia" во: *Philosophia Christiana* (уред. Милан Ѓорѓевиќ). Издавачка куќа ТРИ, Скопје (2022): 42-57; Б. Карацов, 'Филозофската пропедевтика во мрежното општество: од веб 2.0 кон дигиталната методика во наставата по филозофија', *Филозофска трибина* бр. 17 стр. 49-66, Филозофско друштво на Македонија, Скопје, 2015; Б. Карацов

numerous lectures on these topics in Italy as part of an educational project supported by the Erasmus+ program titled *Digital Paideia*³ Additionally, over the past few years, together with an American foundation IDEA SEE, we have developed an international educational program titled *Art for Advocacy*, in which we attempted to connect pop culture phenomena with philosophical pedagogy. In this context, street art, graffiti, comics, hip-hop art, protest poetry, and similar forms were used as discursive strategies for the philosophical initiation of young people, on the one hand, and as tools through which they can engage in social struggles for a better world and improved human relations.⁴

These two educational programs that we worked on over the past years received excellent feedback. We had the opportunity to present them in Italy and England and to implement them with participants from these countries. Therefore, in this text we will focus on the

и 3. Трифунов, ‘Образованието во дигиталното доба: предизвици и решенија’. Списание на научни трудови: Меѓународен дијалог: Исток – Запад (култура, славјанство и економија), Корпоративен Меѓународен Славјански Универзитет “Г. Р. Державин”, Св. Николе – Битола, Р. М. (2014: 280-287)

³ Karadjov, B. 2019 ‘Introduction: What is Digital Paideia (Learning Philosophy in 21 century)’, научен прилог (авторизирани предавања) во рамките на Европската образовната програма Erasmus + во Liceo Artistico “M.Preti/A. Frangipane” Reggio Calabria – Italy. (27.01-01.02.2019); B. Karadjov, 2019 ‘Digital paideia: “Education in 21 century and Learning 2.0”’, научен прилог (авторизирани предавања) во рамките на проектот Digital Paideia во рамките на Европската образовната програма Erasmus +. Велес. (02.12- 06.12.2019)

⁴ B. Karadjov, *Art for Advocacy*. < https://advocacy.mk/sites/default/files/advocacy_syllabus.pdf>

relationships between: new digital technology and philosophical pedagogy and share some of the experiences and insights that we have gained while working on these educational programs. These experiences inspire us with courage and hope that there is a way to initiate today's children in philosophy and to create the first condition of philosophical *paideia*, which is the formation of attention, i.e., cultivating their attention and fostering their love for philosophical thinking. Specifically, the meaning, challenges, and opportunities of teaching philosophy in this new so-called McLuhan Galaxy.

Cognitive malleability

We are witnessing a profound and complete change among young students. In schools, we're seeing the arrival of generations who have grown up with digital technology and are deeply integrated or immersed with the Internet, interactive software, smartphones, computer games, social media, and more. The changes in young people are so radical that they are no longer the young people for whom the educational system was structured. We are not talking about changes in idioms, lifestyle, or the way of dressing and behaving. On the contrary, we are talking about radical cognitive changes in thinking patterns. These are young people born in 2000 and after, i.e., the so-called Generation Z. They have not grown up like millennials or previous generations; instead, they are intertwined with digital technology in a cognitive and behavioral sense. They are immersed with electronic communications, internet connectivity, the information society, social media, new and incredibly powerful gaming consoles, interactive software, new VR headsets, Web 2.0 tools, and collaborative platforms that create

incredibly new sociological and technological relationships. All this has created such a radically new digital environment, a radically new person, and a radically new time in which young people are no longer the youth for whom the educational system was designed.

Marc Prensky, one of the first sociologists of education to recognize and elaborate on this emerging educational challenge, pointed out in his influential study *On the Horizon*⁵ that new technology has become so integrated into young people's lives that it serves as their natural environment. As a result, fundamental changes are occurring in their ways of thinking and processing information, based on this altered environment. Today's youth think, reason, and learn in ways that are entirely different from previous generations. The ubiquity of the online environment and the increased volume and nature of interactions enabled by new digital technology have led to a different way of thinking among students. The cognitive characteristics of these new thought patterns include: *networked thinking*, *leap- like thinking* or forms of so-called *hyper thinking*. This mode of thinking is characterized by complete interactivity, visual and artistic nourishment, nonlinearity, and more.

These significant cognitive changes in thought patterns have been validated through numerous interdisciplinary studies. Renata Numelia Caine and Geoffrey Caine, experts in educational psychology from St. Bernardo State University in California, have long been at the forefront of this research. As leaders of the University Center for Research on Integrative Learning and Teaching Techniques, they were among the first to

⁵ Marc Prensky, "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants", in: *On the Horizon*, MSBUniversity Press, Vol. 9 No. 5, 2001.

emphasize these changes. In their work *Making Connections: Teaching and the Human Brain*, they highlight, through Behavioral and Brain Science, that cognitive models of brain functions are closely linked to the educational process. Their findings point to the direct implications these models have for the restructuring and redesigning of curricula, as well as the broader rethinking of the educational system.⁶

These neurobiological studies unequivocally show that the assumption held by many educators—that all young people possess the same cognitive patterns for processing didactic content—is fundamentally flawed. Based on the stimuli and inputs we receive from our environment, not only does cognitive processing change, but the entire capacity for cognition evolves as well. The concept of neuroplasticity, which suggests that physical changes occur in neural pathways and synapses as a result of environmental influences, helps explain shifts in behavior, thinking, emotional responses, motivation, and more. These ideas were also supported by one of the leading neuropsychiatrists in the United States, Bruce D. Perry from Baylor College of Medicine, who demonstrated through experimental research that high-intensity experiences—such as trauma—can lead to structural changes in the brain.⁷

Prensky acknowledges Perry's research but extrapolates it into a sociological and educational context, arguing that the ubiquity of the digital environment, although not a form of trauma, still brings

⁶ Renata Numelia and Geoffrey Caine. *Making Connections: Teaching and the Human Brain*. Addison Wesley, 2001. <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED335141.pdf>

⁷ Bruce D Perry and Maia Szalavitz. *The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog: And Other Stories from a Child Psychiatrist's Notebook*. Basic Books, 2006.

about changes in brain functions due to the high intensity of stimuli it provides—changes that the educational process cannot afford to ignore.

On the other hand, research in social psychology has provided compelling observational evidence supporting the claim that our thought patterns change depending on our experiences and environment. Although social psychology has reached remarkable levels of understanding, we still learn and think that there are certain immutable inherent logical processes shared by all people. Yet, it is enough to recall Alexander Romanovich Luria, a student of Vygotsky and one of the most renowned neuropsychologists of the 20th century, and his theory on the cultural aspects of cognitive functioning, as explained in his significant study *The Cognitive Development: Its Cultural and Social Foundations*. Based on field experiments from the well-known cultural-scientific expeditions in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, Luria demonstrated that the structure of human cognitive processes (thinking, memory, processing, perception, solving practical and logical problems, etc.) varies depending on the lifestyle of different social groups in various cultural settings.⁸ The thesis of the cultural malleability of thought processes is also supported in the United States by one of the most influential social psychologists from the University of Michigan, Richard E. Nisbett. In his study *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently... And Why*, he revisited and brought back into the scientific spotlight Luria's somewhat

⁸ Alexandr Romanovich Luria, *The Cognitive Development: Its Cultural and Social Foundations*, Harvard University Press, 1976.

forgotten ideas about the relationship between culture and cognition.⁹

Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man

We would like to reference a somewhat overlooked philosopher of our time—who also appeared in Woody Allen’s films—and his remarkably prescient insights in two seminal works: *The Medium is the Massage* (sic)¹⁰ and *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*.¹¹ We are referring to Marshall McLuhan, a brilliant philosopher and communication theorist who, as early as the 1960s, left us with a philosophical legacy that we believe is essential for today’s philosophy educators to engage with. His central insight is this: it is not the content of a medium that is most influential, but its form. The form of a medium shapes our entire experience. The future of media is, in many ways, the future of humanity. McLuhan identified four major media eras—the acoustic, the written, the print, and the electronic—and he predicted the emergence of a fifth era that would integrate all the elements of its predecessors. Each of these eras transforms human perception and behavior according to the sensory dimensions of its dominant medium, fundamentally shaping the totality of human experience. McLuhan even argues that the economy, culture, reading, and philosophy—indeed, all cultural

⁹ Richard E. Nisbett, *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently... And Why*, Free Press, 2003.

¹⁰ M. McLuhan and Quentin Fiore. *The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects*. Produced by Jerome Agel, Gingko Press, 2001

¹¹ M. McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. MIT Press, 1994

forms—are directly shaped by the dominant medium of their era.

The new generation of young people, along with their neurophysiological and cognitive patterns, is profoundly influenced by the speed, interactivity, connectivity, and ubiquity of their sensory-intensive environment—digital reality. These young *e-people* develop cognitive structures that are largely shaped by the ontology and media of their time, as well as their constant immersion in digital ubiquity. Digital media and internet connectivity establish a new ontological framework, drawing from the Latin *ubiquitas*, meaning omnipresence or existence everywhere. Integration with this digital ubiquity—through the internet, virtual reality, social networks, gaming consoles, rapid information transmission, smart mobile devices, AI, and other immersive technologies—fundamentally transforms the way young people think, perceive, and engage with the world.

Research in social psychology has shown that thought patterns do not change easily; rather, cognitive reorganization—also known as biofeedback—occurs only when sensory inputs that sustain an exceptionally high level of attention and focus on our cognitive or neurophysiological capacity undergo radical transformation.

So, what in our contemporary world could serve as a radically different and extraordinarily intense sensory stimulus? Just as post-Gutenberg generations physiologically and cognitively adapted to written language and reading, and as the Baby Boom generation adjusted to television as a dominant medium, today's young people are shaped by the speed, interactivity, networking, ubiquity, and other defining characteristics

of their intensely sensory environment. This environment is the digital, information-rich, internet reality. Children develop a hypertextual mind, think in a fragmented manner, and engage in cognitive browsing. Their thought structures and processes operate in parallel rather than sequentially. The linear thinking that once underpinned the educational system is now being directly reshaped by digital media, computer games, and internet navigation. All of this has given rise to a radically new digital environment, a radically new kind of person, and a radically new era—one in which young people are no longer the youth for whom the traditional educational system was established.

Digital natives and Teaching Philosophy in McLuhan Galaxy

Marc Prensky, in terms of pedagogical practice, introduces a significant distinction. Namely, these young people, these students who are deeply integrated with digital technology and the Internet and who process information in a completely different way, he labels as digital natives, to differentiate them from us, the digital immigrants, who were born and raised before the digital era. In fact, according to him, and confirmed by our teaching practice, a central problem in educational systems is the phenomenon of digital immigrants with their different way of thinking and approach teaching digital natives.¹²

The failure of educational processes, the shortcomings in achieving educational goals, and the

¹² Marc Prensky, “Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants”, in: *On the Horizon*, op. cit., 1-2.

difficulties in establishing knowledge transfer are largely conditioned by the stem's lack of adaptation to these students and the completely incompatible concept of learning and teaching shared by digital immigrants as their didactic and methodological technique.

Moreover, confirmed by our teaching practice, a central problem in educational systems is the phenomenon where digital immigrants, with their different thinking and approaches, teach digital natives. The failure of educational processes, the failure to meet educational goals, and the difficulties in establishing the transfer of knowledge are largely conditioned by the inadequacy of the educational system for these students and the completely incompatible concept of learning/teaching shared by digital immigrants as their didactic and methodological technique. Digital natives are accustomed to quickly absorbing information; they have no problem with parallel processes and some degree of multitasking. However, they prefer graphical over textual, visual over oral, hypertextual over linear narratives. Their natural environment is networking. And due to computer games, they are accustomed to instant gratification, confirmations of achievement, and frequent rewards and praises. However, digital immigrants, in their teaching techniques, speak an entirely different pedagogical language, one that is incomprehensible to the natives.

However, 15 years of teaching practice with this type of young people—internet addicts and gaming enthusiasts—does not allow us to agree with value positions that claim these students have radically lower learning capacities. On the contrary, we are completely convinced that today's *students are not less intelligent; they are simply different*. Thus, in this direction, the

pedagogical recommendation of Prensky, which we share, is that if a modern philosophy teacher wants to be successful in their educational, functional, and developmental goals, they must enter the digital world of new students, respect the changes in thought patterns, enhance their didactic skills with digital tools, visualize the content, maintain and direct attention based on the principles of networking, and methodically include elements from the digital sphere in their teaching. Specifically, they should rethink didactic methods and teaching content according to the possibilities offered by digital technology, the internet, Web 2.0 tools, social networks, interactive software, smart mobile phones, computer games, and more. Specifically, this means rethinking didactic methods and teaching content in line with the opportunities offered by digital technology, the internet, Web 2.0 tools, social networks, interactive software, smart mobile phones, computer games, etc. Young people live in two worlds today: the technological world of new digital media and the world of pop culture. Therefore, if we believe that the classroom should be recreated to reflect the world in which students live, this specifically means that the philosophy teacher must engage students in philosophy by capturing their attention and interest through 1) the digital world and 2) the world of pop culture.

Conclusion: The Educational Shift

In today's interconnected world, access to data and knowledge is more extensive than ever, making it essential for education to equip students with the skills to collect, organize, evaluate, and share information effectively. The internet has evolved into a vast, instantly accessible hub for knowledge creation. Digital Learning

highlights the importance of leveraging online tools to engage with, share, and collaboratively reshape knowledge. The Interactive Web marks a shift in how the internet is utilized, emphasizing active participation and collaboration. It has transformed the web into an interactive platform where users exchange content and create dynamic digital spaces for communication. This transformation has given rise to online communities that facilitate information sharing, profoundly influencing education, society, politics, and culture. Incorporating tools such as wikis, blogs, social networks, and media-sharing platforms into philosophical education can significantly enhance learning in the digital age.

As the Interactive Web redefines communication, Digital Learning ensures that education evolves to meet 21st-century demands. To remain effective, educators must adapt their methods to align with the digital landscape. Teaching for an uncertain future requires embracing modern tools and methodologies to stay connected to students' ever-changing world.

Every teacher, through their lesson topics, objectives, and methodological organization, can integrate digital didactic elements that not only enhance visibility but also align with evolving thought patterns. By combining didactic expertise with digital tools, educators can effectively communicate in the language of digital natives. This approach fosters greater attention, motivation, engagement, and interactivity, ultimately facilitating a smoother cognitive transfer of the planned content. In doing so, the philosophy teacher enters the students' digital world, transforming the classroom into a space where philosophy is explored in harmony with

the realities of the digital age. Teachers in the 21st century, especially philosophy educators, must reshape the classroom environment to reflect the world in which students live. This transformation is not just beneficial, but necessary. As John Dewey wisely said, “If we teach today as we taught yesterday, we rob our children of tomorrow.”

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