Students’ digital well-being: striking a balance in a wired world

Summary of a webinar held in December 2023
About the EUN InnovatED webinar series

This InnovatED series of online events addresses a range of topics around innovation in education. Guest experts share insights and expertise on issues around digital well-being and inclusion, artificial intelligence in education, digital safety, and the role of private actors in education.

The aim of the webinars is to facilitate an open exchange between relevant actors in education on what works and what does not – and most importantly on how to move forward together. The webinars are run for members of European Schoolnet’s steering committee and a closed community of stakeholders. Although participation to the webinars is by invitation, the summaries are shared publicly.
Guest experts

Kasia Kostycka-Allchorne is a developmental psychologist and lecturer in the Department of Psychology at Queen Mary University of London, researching risks and opportunities of growing up in a digital world across the disciplines of child and adolescent development, mental health, clinical interventions, and human-computer interactions. Current research is investigating whether digital interventions can provide psychological support for parents, working with parents, clinicians and app developers on developing and testing digital applications supporting parents both in the community (the SPARKLE project) as well as in the clinical services (see the OPTIMA study). She is also investigating whether, why and for whom digital engagement is a risk or protective factor for mental health (the DIORA study). This strand of research aims to characterise associations between adolescent digital activity and mental health and identify underpinning mechanisms.

Gareth Cort, an independent online safety expert, has been part of the Digital Citizenship Team at European Schoolnet since January 2021 and provides consultancy and services for South West Grid for Learning (SWGfL) and the UK Safer Internet Centre. Gareth works in schools with youth, parents/carers and educators to build awareness and skills around online safety, positive and healthy use of technology and digital citizenship. He is also regularly involved national and European initiatives, creating and developing educational materials for use by educators and youth. These include ProjectEVOLVE (SWGfL/UK Safer Internet Centre), Facts4All: Schools tackling disinformation (EUN) and the KID_ACTIONS cyberbullying project (EUN). Gareth is a qualified primary school teacher and holds a bachelor’s degree in psychology from the University of Surrey, UK.

Nikoleta Giannoutsou is a scientific officer at the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission. For the last four years she worked as a project manager of SELFIE which is a tool designed to support schools to develop their digital capacity. She is also leading research on well-being in the context of digital education. Her research focuses on supporting schools as organizations to adopt a critical approach to the integration of digital technologies. Previously she was a research fellow at the UCL Knowledge Lab and she has collaborated in the design, implementation, and evaluation of a wide range of technology in formal and non-formal settings.
Young people are facing unprecedented challenges when it comes to their digital well-being. They have never lived in a disconnected world and need to be aware of the risks associated with online activities, including privacy breaches and cyber threats. In a world where their physical identity exists in tandem with their digital footprint, students need to understand how to be conscious users of digital. The constant presence of screens and devices can lead to students suffering from information overload and digital fatigue. The impact of social media on mental health is also a growing concern now that anyone can both seek recognition and self-fulfilment from others online and anonymously bully or harass others with little or no repercussion. Social media use often leads to students finding it challenging to focus on their studies due to digital distractions. Regardless of the challenges and threats, the internet is a powerful tool for personal and professional development and one that young people will use more and more. They therefore need understand and build strategies in order to develop competences and agency to thrive in a wired world while maintaining a healthy and balanced life both online and offline.

During the 90’ webinar, moderated by Konstantinos Andronikidis of European Schoolnet, participants discussed four questions:

- What do we mean by students’ digital well-being?
- What are the challenges for schools and teachers when it comes to students’ digital well-being?
- How can we use digital technologies in education to support student well-being?
- How can students build a positive and balanced online presence?

**What do we mean by students’ digital well-being??**

Nikoleta Giannoutsou opened by referring to the European Council conclusions on supporting well-being in digital education (2022) which defines it as “a feeling of physical, cognitive, social and emotional contentment that enables all individuals to engage positively in all digital learning environments including through digital education and training tools and methods, maximise their potential and self-realisation and helps them to act safely online and supports their empowerment in online environments”. A follow-up study by the Joint Research Centre, Seville, provided research evidence on the topic. Nikoleta added that student well-being cannot be seen independently from that of the whole school community and the use of technology in school and outside of it.

Kasia Kostyrka-Allchorne agreed, saying that the focus is very much on the positive, on striking a balance and optimal functioning. For her, well-being is about how young people can achieve positive experiences from interactions in the digital world, minimising loss of control and negative experiences. She underlined the importance of considering different developmental stages and ages and the needs of young people.

Gareth Cort developed the idea of different developmental stages and different ages and experiences online: “There are hugely individual experiences that change the dynamics of what well-being is from one individual to another.” Therefore, young people need skills to minimise risk, particularly if they are neurodiverse, have learning or physical difficulties or other aspects that may make them vulnerable. He pointed out that young people themselves don’t make a distinction between being online and being
offline: “Their use of technology to facilitate relationships, to watch content, to learn things, to experience things is all just intrinsically wrapped into their day-to-day lives.”

“Digital well-being is actually intrinsically embedded in in well-being: itself – you sometimes can’t tease the two apart” – Gareth Cort

Nikoleta Giannoutsou said that there are so many factors that come into play when discussing well-being, and technologies are now so ingrained in the way students live that, “if we try to isolate them to study them, we run the risk of missing the complexity of the phenomenon.” Kasia Kostyrka-Allchorne added that we should acknowledge that well-being is something that may fluctuate over time.

Gareth Cort cited an article by Twenge (2017) about the introduction of the iPhone, and shared the view that this was the point at which children’s well-being “started to take a nosedive across the years up to the current day”, giving rise to generational differences: “it’s this hybrid of technology merging with physical life that older generations have not experienced because they have a distinct life outside technology and with technology”.

Gareth suggested another way of looking at well-being: in terms of access to technology, having access to the right technology to learn, to live, for entertainment and to play: “Experiences during covid lockdowns emphasised the digital divide between the haves and the have nots in terms of technology, being able to maintain friendships and relationships, being able to access vital information for health and well-being, being able to purchase and use products and services”. Kasia added that socio-economic status is a known factor linked to poor mental health, mentioning UNICEF data about how child poverty levels have risen in some Western countries, compounded by lifestyle changes in terms of physical activity. Nikoleta pointed out that, on the other hand, technologies are an instrument to support the democratisation of education.

What are challenges for schools and teachers when it comes to students’ digital well-being?

Evangelia-Lilia Dimaraki, learning consultant and speaker of previous webinar in the same series, said that it is important to keep in mind that we are the last generation who have had a life experience without a constant presence of technology: “We need to find a place for students to stand outside of technology so that they can evaluate their relationship with it and find the right balance, and that requires agency, To have agency, you have to have awareness, recognising the point at which technology is using you and where it starts degrading your life as opposed to upgrading it. You have to disconnect life from digital in order to reassess that connection.”

Gareth Cort wondered whether banning smartphones creates that disconnected space. Evangelia-Lilia said she would not propose a ban, but observed that we were overhyping technology and overfocusing on the positive and treating teachers with misgivings as technophobes. Instead, she advocated having tech free spaces or tech free times in schools, creating a mindset shift that presents technology as optional. Kasia Kostyrka-Allchorne noted that smartphones can be used for activities related to their schoolwork.
such as quick quizzes: “Technology is like food, we can’t really live without it anymore, but we should be able to recognize what is good for us.”

Nikoleta Giannoutsou posed some key questions. These were: What are the assumptions about learning and assessment which are underlying the technologies used to support teaching and learning and what kind of technology design can promote well-being? What is the governance framework for data collected through platforms and technologies used in education? Is there a framework that can cover the students and the usage of these data? Are there differences between Member States and other countries? What happens with repurposing data and using it for their own purposes or making profit? How do these data shape the future of the students? She argued that now “you have like a profile which follows you everywhere, creating preconceptions about you.”

“If you have a record (of how you are as a student) that cannot be erased and follows you in all your next steps, it can activate the cycle of self-fulfilling prophesies making it difficult to reinvent yourself.” – Nikoleta Giannoutsou

Responding to Nikoleta’s second question, Gareth Cort said that there has been an evolutionary shift from just about being safe online to real dangers calling for cyber security, the skills to prevent being exploited, bullied etc., and digital citizenship: what it means to exist in these digital spaces as a member of a digital society. Data and understanding data, copyright and intellectual property have now become more important than ever before, especially now that artificial intelligence is added to the mix. “Maybe that’s what well-being is: having all those different skillsets to be able to use in different contexts to navigate these situations in a positive and safe way.”

Kasia Kostyrka-Alchone underlined the importance of skills and agency now that we leave a much larger digital footprint that ever before. One challenge for schools is how to help young people harness the positives, to create a digital footprint that can help them in the future.

Nikoleta Giannoutsou recommended Selfie, a tool designed to support the digital development of schools: ”We are seeing that digital well-being is becoming more and more one of the dimensions that the school should be considering. We came up with the idea of creating a separate SELFIE item on well-being for digital education, to help schools identify which aspects they need to consider, applying research results.” Also, part of the study they are running in JRC involves identification of best practices to be added in a repository that schools can use to reflect and consider, and to link them with the self-reflection item in SELFIE.

Konstantinos then asked how teachers can measure the well-being, especially the digital well-being of their students when they have to deal with large classes, given that well-being is such a personal and individual thing.

Gareth Cort said that his experience in UK schools suggests that teachers are looking at well-being and digital well-being as a problem to be solved which is the wrong way to look at it “because it’s not something
that you can solve. It’s not a box you can tick to complete and to say job done. It’s an intrinsic part of the operation of the school and the community, both online and offline.” Tools like Selfie offer schools the opportunity to be reflective. If school leaders are constantly agonising over issues that technology is producing in your students, maybe they need to focus instead on the school’s values.

For Nikoleta Giannoutsou the approach is how we ingrain the use of technologies into the pedagogical practice. Evangelia-Lilia Dimaraki pointed out that technology may affect well-being because of the way it is designed: “There is technology designed to align with educational goals and technology that is not”, and “we should not just be saying to people, technology’s just here, let’s develop the skills to deal with it, but we should also be saying let’s design the technology that is actually aligned with our goals. The policy side we should be talking about that.”

**How can we use digital technologies in education to support student well-being?**

Nikoleta Giannoutsou responded first, mentioning her research into the concept of positive computing and working with EdTech companies to see how they can embed well-being into the design of their technologies, how they can support aspects of well-being such as positive emotions, self-awareness, mindfulness, empathy, compassion rather than putting all the responsibility on schools and individuals: “Consider what kind of technologies we want and how we can harness their potential for the well-being of students within the classroom, technologies that combine skills and values.”

Kasia Kostyrka-Allchorne suggested that a repository could be created of trusted resources for young people and templates of interventions that could be applied to supporting well-being through the use of technology.

Gareth Cort asked how you resolve the contradiction between technology design for student well-being with the fact that young people already exist in a world outside education and will then move as adults into a world where the tech industry don’t do that. The [Digital Services Act](https://www.gov.uk/digital-services-act), adopted formally by the biggest 19 platforms, will help because it puts a greater onus on duty of care of users, but “we may get to a point in education where all the technology around you is looking out for you, but you’re existing in a world where the technology may not be looking after you; how you square that difference?”

Asked whether any specific type of technology could support well-being, Gareth suggested that gamification, although seen as a way to engage and interest students, can have a negative impact on digital well-being because “you’re encouraging people to use technology, maybe for longer, maybe for ways that may not be in their best interests.”

Kasia Kostyrka-Allchorne observed that there is a lot of stigma linked to accessing sources of support for mental health or well-being but accessing them through technology can be very private. She also referred to [UK Children’s Commissioner ‘digital 5 a day’ public health campaign](https://www.ukchildrenscommissioner.gov.uk/digital5aday/) to promote design features and positive aspects of technology use (similar to the ‘five a day’ healthy eating campaign in the UK but related to digital use), which could take some of the burden of responsibility away from schools and parents; “I really like this because it focuses on the positive.”
Nikoleta Giannoutsou echoed Gareth’s observation that the world out there is very different from the world in schools. She argued that there should be more emphasis on the positive: “sometimes we over-emphasise the risks.”

In discussion, Borut Čampelj, from the Ministry of Education in Slovenia, said that when he was involved in preparing the Council recommendation the authors included a recommendation of making a duty of care visible to those who produce applications which would be of value for all people not only young people: “We cannot accept that pupils use Instagram for four hours. Unless we do something, our young people will be lost in this.”

Kasia Kostyrka-Allchorne pointed out that children and young people are often portrayed as vulnerable and passive when it comes to the tech use when actually they are probably very resourceful participants in this world, and perhaps they can teach us: ”I think it’s really important to bring them to the forefront of these discussions, to give them voice, hear their perspectives and concerns, and listen to how they are navigating this world.” Adults can then find solutions and help them navigate it.

Gareth Cort said that as digital natives born into a world of technology, they have naturally picked up certain skills and attributes that we as other generations don’t have. He suggested peer to peer education, “sometimes a very quick way of getting some very positive results”.

Nikoleta Giannoutsou added that adults can enable young people to take agency on their own, enabling them to play this role and acknowledging that they have expertise.

Evangelia-Lilia Dimaraki said that even if we safeguard students in schools, there are all kinds of technologies that they’re using outside or that they are going to be using in their life that are not necessarily designed in the same caring way. The revelation that there is such a thing as persuasive design in the applications we use every day can make a great difference in the way people relate to technology “because it’s like revealing the magician’s trick.” She added that when she works with teachers, “one of the first activities I give them is to get interested in what their students are doing online, not to just tell them that they’re using it too much”.

**How can students build a positive and balanced online presence?**

For Kasia Kostyrka-Allchorne it depends above all on their age. Young people need help to navigate this world “in a nurturing and safe way”, giving them an opportunity to be exposed to some risks in a controlled way is “the only way they can build resilience, being exposed to risk in the same way as when I was a child and my parents would allow me to travel further away.” This very much relies on trust and giving young people a safe space to expand their digital skills and awareness of the digital world.

“We should allow children to travel further into that digital world.” – Kasia Kostyrka-Allchorne

Nikoleta Giannoutsou said it’s about “computational awareness”, a term used by the Center for Computational Thinking and Design in Aarhus University in Denmark (Center for Computational Thinking &
Design (CCTD): [https://cctd.au.dk](https://cctd.au.dk). Computational awareness involves understanding how persuasive technology works and how you behave in a social space and the power of social dynamics, because the way students use technologies is shaped by the social group to which they belong.

**Gareth Cort** agreed, mentioning the work done in Australia drawing parallels with attachment theories in psychology proposing a safe space, “a walled garden” for young people to inhabit to develop the skills to develop understanding of their digital experiences and the impact on them and then to venture further and further away, but always able to retreat back to that safe space if they need to as well. He said that in the past five years he has noted a shift towards more emphasis on teaching social and emotional learning skills. A framework, *Education for a Connected World*, developed in the UK and published by the education ministry, takes a holistic approach to competencies and skills to help young people understand and navigate all aspects of their digital experiences, whether online safety, digital assistantship, media literacy or digital well-being. It includes ‘I can’ statements covering ages 4 to 18 across eight key strands: self-image and identity, online relationships, online reputation, online bullying, health, well-being and lifestyle, managing online information, copyright and ownership and privacy and security.

**Kasia Kostyrka-Allchorne** talked about the role of peers and adults as role models, peers as buddies in a peer support system where older children “are the mentors” and adults, who should “think about how we portray ourselves online and build our digital footprint”.

**Nikoleta Giannoutsou** called for more participation of teachers and students in the decision-making process about how technologies are integrated in the schools and for more autonomy on how they use technologies to support their own learning within and outside the school.

Konstantinos Andronikidis concluded the webinar by saying that perhaps we should move from the school being the place where all society’s problems will be solved, to accepting our own responsibility as parents, and active citizens.

**References**

Better Internet for Kids Teacher corner [https://www.betterinternetforkids.eu/teacher-corner](https://www.betterinternetforkids.eu/teacher-corner)

Center for Computational Thinking and Design: Aarhus University Denmark: [https://cctd.au.dk](https://cctd.au.dk)


The three studies can also be [accessed here](https://doi.org/10.1111/camh.12619).