

The Promise of Social Justice through Digitalization in Education

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Abstract

Different global institutions like the UN and the UNESCO make claims on a positive potential that the digitalization could have in achieving more social justice, particularly through education. This belief in the positive effects of digitalization in education will be challenged in this paper by addressing three concerns that are particularly connected with the experience of collectivity:

- 1) Social media is confused with a public space.
- 2) The isolating experience in using digital tools stands in contrast to the collectiveness of educational settings.
- 3) Educational responsibility is lost when digital tools are in charge of education.

These concerns will be discussed with reference to Hannah Arendt's differentiation of disparate life spheres (the private, the political and the social), her analysis of the experience of being alone (solitude, isolation and loneliness) and her critique concerning the devaluation of the teacher's profession. Finally, the analysis will be connected to a post-critical perspective in education that emphasizes the experience of collectivity in educational settings.

Keywords: Digitalization; Hannah Arendt; isolation; collectivity; educational responsibility; post-critical pedagogy.

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Introduction

The digitalization of educational settings is often associated with the idea that it could enable a positive change in social justice.¹ There is the hope that through digital tools and spaces more people could participate in (online) discussions. Obviously, the participation in the digital world is only possible for the ones that possess reliable tools to enter it. In this paper, I do not want to focus on this materialistic perspective even though it would be also important. I rather want to address – with the help of Hannah Arendt's ideas – three other concerns in relation to the promise of social justice through digitalization in education that are particularly connected with the experience of collectivity:

- (1) Social media is confused with a public space.
- (2) The isolating experience in using digital tools stands in contrast to the collectiveness of educational settings.
- (3) Educational responsibility is lost when digital tools are in charge of education.

These three concerns are raising doubts about different areas of education. The first concern addresses the context of education and its influence on educational institutions like the school. The second concern deals with questions of educational theory and how educational processes change when digital tools are used. The last doubt concentrates on the role of the teacher and their responsibility in digital settings. In the conclusion all these concerns are brought together with a post-critical perspective in education as it puts an emphasis on the collectivity of educational experiences. Because only through collective experiences in which one becomes familiar with the plurality of the world, it becomes understandable why discussions around concepts like social justice might be important.

¹ Some examples can be found among global organisation like the UN (2006 and 2023) and the UNESCO (technology plays an important part in their agenda for Education2030) but particularly religious charity groups and associations focus on the promise of social justice through technology and digitalization, e.g. the *World Association for Christian Communication* (WACC) published the manifesto «Communication for Social Justice in a Digital Age» in 2021. Another example is the platform «Knowledge for Development without Borders. Digitalisation for Development», which labels itself as a «digitalization platform for Social Justice» (KFDWB in Dec 2023). Of course, education is mentioned as a key in all these concepts that want to achieve social justice with the help of digitalisation and technology. To just give one example: «Despite these multiple crises, there are many opportunities to build a coalition for social justice and to unleash greater investments in decent jobs, with a particular focus on the green, digital and care economy, and on young people».

Social Media: Private, Social or Public?

In her *Reflections on Little Rock* Arendt commented on the beginning of the desegregation in the USA, particularly in schools. Even though her arguments on the importance of different rights (e.g. the right to choose who you marry vs. the right to choose your children's school) were proven wrong (cf. Berkowitz, 2020, pp. 73-80), her differentiation of spheres can still be a helpful analytic tool to examine social media and its dynamics. Arendt differentiates three spheres between which people constantly move: the private, the social and the public sphere. All three spheres are ruled by different principles. The private realm is ruled by the principle of exclusiveness: «Here we choose those with whom we wish to spend our lives, personal friends and those we love; and our choice is guided not by likeness or qualities shared by a group of people – it is not guided, indeed, by any objective standards or rules» (Arendt, 1959, p. 52).

In contrast to that the public realm is ruled by the principle of equality. The public sphere is the place of the body politic and the space of legislature. Therefore, discrimination and prejudices cannot play a part in this sphere. Between the private and the public realm lies the social sphere (or Arendt also just likes to call it “the society”) that she characterizes as follows:

What equality is to the body politic – its innermost principle – discrimination is to society. Society is that curious, somewhat hybrid realm between the political and the private in which, since the beginning of the modern age, most men have spent the greater part of their lives. For each time we leave the protective four walls of our private homes and cross over the threshold into the public world, we enter first, not the political realm of equality, but the social sphere (*Ibid.*, p. 51).

She continues to underline that what matters in the social sphere «is not personal distinction but the differences by which people belong to certain groups whose very identifiability demands that they discriminate against other groups in the same domain» (*Ibidem*). To summarize Arendt's description of the social sphere: it is a space where the belonging to a certain group stands in the foreground and where the distinction from other groups is most important. In addition to that, the social sphere is a hybrid realm that sometimes seems to overlap with the private or the public.

If we think about social media platforms such as Facebook (or Instagram, which is now part of Facebook or rather the Meta company), the hybrid character of social media becomes very visible: those platforms have the possibility to chat in private (in their messengers), they offer a choice when you make a post (if you want to show it to everyone or just your “friends”)

or you can choose to publish a fully “public” post that is visible to everyone using the platform (or even for non-users that can find your post via search engines like Google). However, there are many ways of using these platforms that are not public. At the same time, conversations that were private can be made public through them – if you make a screenshot of a private conversation and then publish the photo publicly. The hybridity of those platforms is obvious but still, they are often confused with public spaces, in which everyone can easily participate. The problem with this confusion is that discussions around topics (like social justice, for example) that take place on those platforms are mistaken for public debates even though they are often quite exclusive and limited – and many times the sources and contexts of certain claims are not transparent.²

Arendt’s differentiation, particularly, between the social and the public realm is helpful to emphasize that the underlying principles matter here: if social media is understood as a public space even though its underlying principles are discrimination and distinction, those principles are “made” public or claimed to be public. Social media enables many people to make statements on public issues but that does not mean that these statements have a general perspective or follow the principle of equality that is essential to the public realm. Arendt’s critique of the society springs from the fear that individual interests could replace the general. This concern is even more reasonable in reference to social media platforms where individual interests are constantly mistaken for general statements.

Isolation versus Collectivity

When we enter the digital space, we are usually alone, sitting in our separate rooms, our (home) offices or even when we are surrounded by people, we block them out (often with the help of headphones). Entering the digital space asks for a certain kind of separation from others, however, this separation can be of different quality. Arendt offers a threefold division of the experience of being alone: she separates solitude from isolation and loneliness (cf. Arendt, 2017, pp. 623-628). Solitude is the creative withdrawal from others. When I am in solitude, I am only physically alone but, in my mind, I am still surrounded by others, dialoguing with them, and imagining their perspectives on the topic I am dealing with. In contrast to

² The same could be noted for tools like ChatGPT, which seems to be a source of endless knowledge, even though many flaws have been detected to its answers already (cf. Rojahn, 2024). Further remarks on the role of ChatGPT in education will follow in part three on “Educational Responsibility”.

that isolation concerns the political space. When I am isolated, I have no possibility to act together with others (cf. *Ibid.*, p. 623). I am stripped of my political powers: «isolated men are powerless by definition» (*Ibid.*). In relation to the above-mentioned principle of equality in the political sphere, isolated humans are not considered to be equal and thus, they are not allowed to participate in political discussions. This is how Arendt tries to grasp the marginalization of certain groups. However, isolated people still have the private sphere as their refuge: in their homes, they still can connect with others and experience belongingness.

The worst experience of “being alone” is loneliness because it «concerns human life as a whole» (*Ibid.*: 624). In loneliness Arendt sees one of the reasons why totalitarianism in 1930s-Germany could succeed. Loneliness means to be separated in the political as well as in the private sphere. Arendt emphasizes: «Loneliness is not solitude. Solitude requires being alone whereas loneliness shows itself most sharply in company with others» (*Ibid.*, p. 625). She makes clear that loneliness is the loss of common sense, which is one of our most important connections with other people that relates us to the world:

Even the experience of the materially and sensually given world depends upon my being in contact with other men, upon our common sense which regulates and controls all other senses and without which each of us would be enclosed in his own particularity of sense data which in themselves are unreliable and treacherous. Only because we have common sense, that is only because not one man, but men in the plural inhabit the earth can we trust our immediate sensual experience (*Ibid.*, p. 625).

Arendt underlines that we need other people to make sense of our individual experiences. The interaction with others keeps us from being trapped in our own particularity. Again, Arendt fears that the particular will be separated from the general.

The mediation between the particular and the general is the focus of every educational theory (in the sense of theory of *Bildung*): if either the particular is overemphasized or the general is overwhelming, there is no process of *Bildung*. To come back to the different experiences of being alone: solitude still enables processes of *Bildung*, while isolation harshly limits the spaces in which *Bildung* is possible. Finally, loneliness is a state in which every possibility of educational processes seems to be lost.

Arendt’s differentiation comes from her analysis of totalitarianism and I do not want to hastily transfer it to education in the context of the digital space. However, I want to argue that her differentiation of solitude, isolation and loneliness can be helpful to illustrate some of the dangers we need to be aware of when we are being very hopeful about digital spaces and

possibilities for education within them (and about creating more social justice in that context). The digital space provides many opportunities to feel connected with others, but it also offers endless possibilities to feel lonely, excluded and cut off. And when we enter the digital space, we usually withdraw ourselves from the analogue world. Sitting in front of a screen (no matter which size) is usually a very isolating activity that separates us from the people around us.

There seems to be some similarity to Arendt's concept of isolation here: isolation means that we are excluded from the political (which for Arendt is the public) space but can still connect with people in the private realm. To enter the digital space, we are usually withdrawing ourselves from the public sphere, at least in a physical sense. When we do enter a "public" discussion in the digital space, it is very different from a public discussion in an analogue setting. Online we are usually not able to see the whole of our audience, to notice if they are reacting bodily or acoustically. Even if a public discussion takes place in a video tool like Zoom, there are some limits to the visibility and perceptibility. So, even when we are entering a public discussion in a digital space, the setting can make us feel alone or at least, very separated from others. This stands in harsh contrast to analogue discussions that usually go hand in hand with a sense of collectivity.

So, what I want to underline here is that being in a digital space comes along with an experience of separation and isolation (in German, I would use the term "Vereinzellung"). Because of that I am very cautious about the hope that the digital space could facilitate, encourage or strengthen discussions around "social justice" easily. Digital spaces do not automatically invite people to have collective experiences; quite the contrary: it takes a lot of effort to create some sense of collectivity and belongingness in the digital space at all.³ However, a sense of collectivity seems to be necessary to understand why we need a concept like social justice. Only if we interact with others, notice our similarities but also the differences in our living conditions, can we understand why we need to bother ourselves with concepts like social justice.

Now some might argue that the digital space provides many examples of photos, videos and narrations that also make us aware that social justice needs to be discussed. And that is, of course, true, but you can decide whenever you want to watch them, turn them off or if you want to avoid them. In analogue public spaces you cannot escape from the presence of others that easily. Public spaces, particularly schools and universities,

³ As most of us noticed during the pandemic, when we had to quickly turn our seminars into online courses.

confront us with other people – without giving us a choice if we want to spend our time with them or not. There we have to learn how to «bear with strangers» (as Morten Kørsgaard (2019) puts it with reference to Arendt).⁴ This experience of collectivity – of interacting with others that are very different to oneself – is essential to educational spaces.

Educational Responsibility⁵

Isolating experiences are also very present in schools since new forms of pedagogical diagnostics became popular. Those diagnostics promise that with the help of certain standardized tests, every student's merit can be measured, and an individual learning profile can be developed. The hope is that students can study more efficiently with the help of individualized learning plans. Those plans could also be used to learn with the help of artificial intelligences. The language learning model ChatGPT is one of the artificial intelligences that is ascribed to have high pedagogical potential (cf. Rojahn, 2024) because it can answer numerous questions in a dialogical form. It is sometimes considered to be an effective “substitute teacher” that can support students in their individualized learning.⁶ ChatGPT appears to be a medium that can help with the democratisation of knowledge: everyone can access knowledge and adapt it to their needs.

ChatGPT will answer every question that one might ask without any doubt. To most of the questions, it answers with a list⁷ – always trying to give a short and condensed overview. You can ask for adaption in style or some more details about one point of the list. But your first impression of many topics – if you use ChatGPT to become familiar with them – will be a

⁴ Moreover, Masschelein and Simons (2013) make clear that schools are special places in which students experience collectivity and belongingness: «Here we want to call out an often-neglected aspect of the school: typical for the scholastic is that it involves more than one student. Individual education, or focusing exclusively on so-called individual learning pathways, is not a form of scholastic education. [...] The reason for this is simple but profound: it is only by addressing the group that the teacher is forced, as it were, to be attentive to everyone and no one in particular. The teacher talks to a group of students and, in doing so, speaks to each one individually; she speaks to no one in particular and thus to everyone» (p. 73).

⁵ Some parts of the argumentation in this section might overlap with my paper «Nativity at Risk? Raising Doubts on the Educational Importance of ChatGPT» (2024).

⁶ Two recent examples would be: Kasneci et al., 2023 and Ausat et al., 2023.

⁷ I asked ChatGPT the following questions and it always answered with a list: A) What is social justice? B) Can digitalization help with social justice? C) Are there different theories on social justice? D) Can you, ChatGPT, help with social justice? The answers to question B and D did overlap in many points.

summarized list. An overview like that usually stands at the end of a searching process, in which one collects different concepts and ideas to then dive deeper into the theme. When you use ChatGPT to learn about something new, it throws you into the middle of a possible learning process, where you already find a ready-made list that then guides your further search. However, ChatGPT already made some choices for you. You can try to ask it how it generated the list but that will not give you an insight into how ChatGPT combines and weighs different sources. For example, when I asked ChatGPT how it came up with its list to the question “Can you, ChatGPT, help with social justice?”, its answer was “This understanding comes from a wide range of sources, including academic literature, historical texts, and contemporary discussions on the topic.” ChatGPT does not give exact sources and does not make transparent which importance it gives to which kind of sources, thus it can also lead to false information.⁸ It does not take over responsibility for any information that it hands out.

Hannah Arendt gives a critical characterization of a “progressive” teacher in her essay *The Crisis in Education* (1961): «A teacher, so it was thought, is a man who can simply teach anything; his training is in teaching, not in the mastery of any particular subject» (*Ibid.*, 1958, p. 182). She criticizes that this idea of a teacher ignores the authority that springs from deeper knowledge: «This in turn means not only that the students are actually left to their own resources but that the most legitimate source of the teacher’s authority as the person who [...] still knows more and can do more than oneself is no longer effective» (*Ibid.*). Apart from the knowledge, the most important characteristic of a teacher is that s/he takes over responsibility for the world (cf. *Ibid.*, p. 186) and thus, does not leave the children alone with getting to know the world. Arendt underlines that the teacher always has to mediate between the child and the world as s/he is responsible for both: the well-being of the child while entering the world and the preservation of the world’s knowledge (cf. *Ibidem*). S/he is, particularly, in charge of making the context of the knowledge s/he is teaching transparent and to show the plurality of different standpoints on a topic. This task is crucial because it is a preparation for learning how to form judgements (cf. Arendt, 1992).

ChatGPT can be understood as a “progressive” teacher that has found the one ultimate method because it (or its algorithm) supposedly can find answers to any question. It is like an omniscient teacher that you can ask whatever question you can think of. However, «students are actually left to their own resources» (cf. Arendt, 1961, p. 182) in finding the right questions

⁸ When you open ChatGPT, it usually warns you that it might give you false information and it tells you that it was not created to handout advise.

to ask and trying to understand what sources stand behind the answers. Even though ChatGPT was trained on the basis of an enormous database, it does not make transparent how it structures this data pool and then generates an answer out of it. It might value all the sources evenly, it might look for the amount of repetitions of an information or it might take scientific standards into account. The problem is that ChatGPT does not reveal its selection criteria and when students use it for their individual learning plan, they might be overwhelmed and misled by flawed information.⁹

Conclusion

To come to an end, I would like to recapitulate and connect the first two sections of this paper. The part on social media can be understood as the outside-of-school-context that students and teachers have to deal with constantly when entering digital spaces. So, without any special (educational) intention teachers and students use social media and it is usually their first idea of how digital spaces work – what can be uttered and how people interact in digital spaces. Thus, their first experience with the digital space is one that is social – from an Arendtian perspective it is therefore ruled by distinction and discrimination. This means it is a space, in which the display of difference, the performance of separation, stands in the foreground.

This experience of distinction matches well with the experience of isolation that was outlined in the second part of this paper. Entering the digital space already entails a certain experience of being alone that narrows possibilities of education. Thus, creating collectivity is the biggest challenge for educational settings in digital spaces (as it is also a challenge for education in analogue settings). Collective experiences are also an important prerequisite for understanding why social justice matters and why it is worth to aim for it.

From a post-critical perspective, I would argue that scholastic experiences usually entail moments of collectivity when we gather around the table to

⁹ Just to be clear: The aim of this paper is not to argue for a ban against ChatGPT in schools. Instead of that, the objective is a realistic assessment of ChatGPT's abilities and its educational potential. One of the biggest concerns that makes this artificial intelligence (A.I.) a very questionable "substitute teacher" is that its responses lack transparency and that it does not take over responsibility for the information that it shares. Rather than making teacher's work easier, it adds another task to their duties: teaching students how to question the answers of any A.I. and how to detect false/fake information. This is not a completely new task for teachers, but the importance of this duty has increased since ChatGPT was introduced.

deal with the thing that was put there by the teacher (cf. Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2019, pp. 56-60).¹⁰ Conveying this metaphor to the digital space, the problem seems to be that in the digital space we cannot make sure if every student even sees the table and if they can leave their private realm to take a seat at it. Another important experience that the post-critical perspective emphasizes is the experience of equality through the gathering around the table. The shared curiosity and puzzlement concerning the thing on the table creates equality and a sense of belongingness. As Masschelein and Simons (2013) put it: «A community of students is a unique community; it is a community of people who have nothing (yet) in common, but by confronting what is brought to the table, its members can experience what it means to share something and activate their ability to renew the world» (p. 73).

So, before we can even start to think about how education in the digital space could influence social justice, we first have to figure out how to put up a “digital table” and how students can gather around it – even though they might not even have left the private realm, might not be ready to enter a public space and might feel isolated as soon as they take a look at the screen.

In addition to that, the idea of substituting teachers with A.I.s like ChatGPT entirely deletes collectivity from educational settings. Individual learning with ChatGPT does not need any table or any other people to gather around it anymore. The student is left alone completely, accessing information in the form of lists without anyone who raises doubts or helps to understand how the list might have come into being.

However, a post-critical standpoint also tries to outline the promising sides of any content and that is why I will briefly add a more hopeful comment. I think that teachers have already gathered a lot of experience with digital tools and their limits during the pandemic. There were, at least, two important remarks by teachers concerning the “digital table”. Firstly, when the teacher and the group already knew each other well from many analogue study experiences, they were already quite good in setting up a table together and were also able to do it in the digital space. And secondly, many teachers addressed the problem of setting up a digital table, so they turned it into a “thing” for a moment, and asked their students about ideas how to create a collective setting and then they found solutions together. In a similar manner, teachers and students already started to explore ChatGPT and its abilities together. Some teachers let their students use it to find some first impressions

¹⁰ «*A thing brings people together because it divides them.* This means that a thing makes people equal without overcoming or abolishing their diversity. People gathered around a thing are equal in the sense Rancière has conceived of when he speaks of “the democracy of the book”: a thing is put on the table, so that everyone can see it, investigate it, make claims about it, refer to it in order to persuade others, etc.» (p. 57, italics in original).

of a new topic. Others posed some questions about a text that they were beginning to discuss in class and then they examined ChatGPT's answers together. But most importantly, they explored the possibilities and limits of ChatGPT in a collective educational setting.

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