

# Preface

## WHAT DO WE TAKE FOR GRANTED AND WHY?

The purpose of a book's preface is to serve as an introduction to the ideas that are presented for the reader.

We ask our readers, researchers, teachers in higher education, the managers of these institutions, and professionals in information communication technologies, to help us consider two questions that we, as educationalists, researchers, and citizens find important in light of contemporary developments.

First, do we, contemporary people, really have more freedom (here we are not considering the political dimension, though in a way, maybe we are; however, this dimension was not at a direct focus of our thought) and are we really happier than generations before us? We think that a freedom that is grounded on the scientific and technological advancements is an illusion. We notice that fast technological developments require us to constantly sacrifice fractions of our freedom in order to follow these developments, and extremely rarely (and this causes us much concern), we try to make personal individual sense about those changes to us as people, citizens, and professionals.

Second, if our professional and social reality changes so fast, do we need some new terms?

At the dawn of the 21st century, Prensky (2001) famously coined young people who were in their early twenties, "digital immigrants." Ten year later, Palfrey and Gasser (2010) claimed that the "digital era has transformed how people live their lives and relate to one another and to the world around them." Digital natives "live much of their lives online without distinguishing online and offline" (Palfrey & Gasser, 2010). The authors pursued this argument by providing examples of how young people juggle with three or four identities in their activities in digital spaces and further argued against the separation between identities in real and digital spaces. They opened up the space for thinking about the question of youth identities as an assortment of several identities that are represented in a real-digital continuum. These identities may not be known to parents or to a certain circle of friends in order to maintain a safe and author-controlled (or so it seems) environment. However, this multiplication of identities may not always result in the ultimate goal of becoming socially accepted, and certainly, it does not imply that young people are always safe in the environments they visit (as safety is an illusion).

Digital spaces are as full of dangers as real ones. Digital spaces have become so crowded that they have come to represent real spaces more than the real spaces themselves (if not in the physical then certainly in the psychological sense). A recent event in the United Kingdom with cyber-bullying resulting in the loss of a young person's life provides just one well-known example for the concerns around safety (Mirror, n.d.).

Therefore, even if some will argue that the themes are over discussed and losing their significance, we will object to the statement. We stand for the position that there is an ever-increasing need for edu-

cationalists, policy makers, and managers of (especially higher) educational institutions to discuss and highlight the issue, to be loud in the process and not to quit. It was never easy to become a person. At all times a person faced challenges. Sometimes these were wars, sometimes famine, sometimes natural disasters, or all of them together. Sometimes people lived under conditions where extreme emphasis was placed on duties, which led to the institution of a totalitarian state of everyday life. Today we (we are referring to one-third of the global population, the so-called developed and democratic countries) seemingly live under conditions where extreme emphasis is placed on freedoms. Does this emphasis on freedoms presuppose the very existence of freedom, or does it merely lift a veil of illusion about the lack of freedom in contemporary societies?

At the risk of instigating counter-arguments, we provide here just one example for thought. Digital natives seemingly are freer than any other generation who ever lived on this earth. It would seem that the very fact that they have several identities (under several names) would serve as a supporting argument for this claim. The presence of several identities means that if a young person feels unsafe in one space, where, let us say, identity A inhabits, he or she may easily migrate to another space, where, let us say, identity B resides. A young person may continue in that space the pursuit of popularity, accomplishment, or anything else that is important for this young person. However, with competition ever increasing and with crowds of participants in each space trying to gain all those benefits of communication, the drama of communication might be seen to increase rather than decrease. Each space requires inhabitants to perform at their best. Each space is full of equals; therefore, each space generates popular and unpopular inhabitants, and each space sets up its own requirements rather than providing support systems. Instead of having to deal with the pressure to perform at one's best in one or two spaces, a young person (or actually, anyone participating in a number of spaces with a number of identities) faces the pressure to perform at her/his best in a number of spaces. Pressure is, therefore, ever increasing.

Why are we discussing this issue involving deeply personal choices and experiences? Because learning is, at least according to Jarvis (2001), a deeply intimate human experience. It is learning that builds human character. We learn to become friends, partners, citizens, professionals, dissidents, parents, to participate in charity, and to provide for ourselves and our families.

No wonder, even when the life of an individual (at least in some countries) is longer and healthier than ever before, it is as unhappy as ever (Frankl, 2010). Accelerated transformations, external and internal pressures, and extended personal and social requirements have led to a life lived without a compass: a life where meaning is not attributed to what people do or even to who people are.

This book attempts to conceptualise ICTs in higher education as a system emphasising the importance of all comprising elements involved. E-learning as a socio-cultural system is comprised of a set of elements: Technologies (ICT); processes and interactions; content (information); participants (teachers, students, ICT professionals); and their socio-cultural context (Butrimė & Zuzevičiūtė, 2013).

With the exponential increase of ICT provisions for higher education, some university teachers may find themselves in need of support regarding their use, because in many cases support and facilitation are required to generate meaning for applying technologies in teaching and learning processes. We do not negate the need to provide students with educational support in reflecting on their learning and the role of the ICT provisions in their learning. We are merely stating the need for a systemic and multi-dimensional approach in the field. There is a demand for communication between managers and teachers, students, policy makers, and especially professional developers of information-communication technologies in order to maintain a balanced path for educational developments.

We firmly believe in the need of balanced developments in this sphere; otherwise, extremely fast development of technologies will reduce rather than expand our freedoms as citizens, persons, and professionals. The overemphasis on some aspects of human existence and the concurrent negligence of other aspects results in a distorted landscape of meanings, beliefs, and hopes. In our case, the elements that grow with ever-increasing speed are ICTs and ICT provisions for education. What about the other elements? What about people who are sucked into this whirlpool? Are they ready to use ICT provisions? Are they encouraged? Do they get support or are they left alone to face insurmountable and ever-increasing challenges? In many cases, this loneliness of human beings at the face of serious challenges may lead to the suffering referred to by Frankl (2010). As editors of this book, our intention was to facilitate sustainability and promote balanced and systemic growth rather than overemphasise one of the elements and, consequently, cause damage to other elements and the system itself.

Therefore, while considering the first question articulated in this introduction, we think that a balanced and critical approach to technological developments is crucial. We firmly believe that any person, any professional, and especially young people should be constantly encouraged to be critical and sometimes even skeptical about some of the new technological developments. And yet, as our relatively healthy, comfortable, and long life depends on those technological advancements, in higher education especially, we, as educationalists, are obliged to help young people to try to make sense of them and to locate them within their personal and professional lives rather than allow those advancements to take over their lives and some of their freedom.

This position for the need for the balanced development of e-learning as a sociocultural system leads us to the second question. More than a decade ago, the concept of the “digital native” was introduced. Today, a different concept is worth considering in relation to similar phenomena, namely that of “digital migration.” Can we, as professionals, locate our work-related tasks within territory we were born into or permanently reside in? Obviously, no. If we, teachers, researchers, managers, and developers, consider for a moment how much of our work is global, the answer will vary from a third to its totality. Digital migration has become such an integral part of our professional (surely, also of our personal, but here we narrow our analysis for the sake of argument) life that it can be seen as mundane.

We ought to be aware that human history cannot be narrated as simply the history of globalization. Even though the term “globalization” has been dominant in scientific, political, and economical discourse during these last decades, the phenomenon itself has been an integral reality of all recorded human history. Even if, objectively, globalization has always been a reality in the history of humankind, only in recent years have people both the time and the means to experience globalization and to participate in it intensively. We claim that one of the characterizing features of this globalizing process is digital migration.

Digital migration has obvious social benefits. Although we will not dwell on these any further, they prompt us to ask, Is it productive to insist on a separation between digital and real spaces? If digital spaces are so important for young and mature people alike, if they comprise such an enormous part of a professional’s life that it is possible to conceptualise digital migration being a constant state of a professional’s life, maybe we are faced by a need to provide ourselves with some other form of separation. Obviously, digital spaces are very real for digital migrants, who earn their salary in Finland, Canada, and Brazil while residing in Australia. And obviously, digital spaces are very real for our teenaged sons and daughters, whose best friends reside half a world away.

Should we try to uphold a separation between *real-digital* and *real-face-to-face* spaces? Drawing from the ideas put forward by the contributors to this volume, as well as the comments of the reviewers, we may suggest that e-learning as a sociocultural system may be analysed as an n-volution. That is, it is

always evolving, always changing by itself. However, it is we, participants in the system, teachers, students, managers of higher education institutions, representatives of business, and professional IT developers and policy makers, who are constantly changing both ourselves and the system. It is important to try to foster a balanced approach to this development in order to have as successful experiences of learning and teaching in higher education as possible in spite of all those challenges that a human faces in his/her life.

## STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The volume is organised in four sections: “E-Learning Challenges in Higher Education: Digital Natives vs. Digital Savages”; “IT Professionals: Lonely Hunters or Scout Leaders?”; “Managers in Higher Education: Engines for Changes, Followers or By-Slanders?”; and “Other Agents in the Landscape of Higher Education: Supporters, Passengers, and Drivers?”

Each of these sections attempts to address the questions set above from different perspectives and by utilising a variety of conceptual tools and empirical evidence.

For the concluding remarks, we may just note that e-learning, as it was offered earlier, may be conceptualized as a sociocultural system that has several elements: learner (student), teacher, any IT platform or tool, contents, context, and interactions. There are many opportunities, tools, software solutions today. However, teachers, students, IT professionals, managers, social partners, and policy makers are the main actors who develop, support, and use and criticize available tools. The chapters explore paradoxes and challenges that those actors face and struggle with in order to perform at their best. In addition, the chapters provide insights into supporting these efforts. Mutual respect, peer support, discussions, professional educational, and organizational support are of extreme importance in developing the system of e-learning in a balanced way, without any of the elements of the system gaining an advantage at the expense of neglecting some other element.

*Vaiva Zuzevičiūtė*  
*Mykolas Romeris University, Lithuania*

*Edita Butrimė*  
*Lithuanian University of Health Sciences, Lithuania*

*Daiva Vitkutė-Adžskauskienė*  
*Vytautas Magnus University, Lithuania*

*Vladislav Vladimirovich Fomin*  
*Vytautas Magnus University, Lithuania*

*Kathy Kikis-Papadakis*  
*Foundation for Research and Technology, Greece*

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