

Chapter 15

Emerging Platform Education: What Are the Implications of Education Processes' Digitization?

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ABSTRACT

By offering students and teachers innovative tools and learning spaces, new information and communication technologies are rapidly changing how education is provided. Once mainly a question of displaying static hypertext documents, digitization has now extended to the management of content in dynamic systems that allow active participation. With this new stage in the digitization of education, often referred to as platformization, there is a need to reflect on the process's implications. Starting from a description of this new phenomenon and its manifestations—particularly in Italy—this chapter will explore the potential and critical aspects of platform education.

INTRODUCTION

A number of expressions have recently begun to circulate to describe the many changes that new communication and information technologies have brought about in education, such as ‘platformization of education’ (van Dijck & Poell, 2018), ‘platform pedagogies’ (DiGiacomo et al., 2019); ‘platform teachers and platform classrooms’ (Williamson, 2019). These expressions, originating in different fields of study and used for different research purposes, draw attention to the growing importance of teaching via widely available online platforms. In the broad sense, platform education includes different products and teaching strategies, including as e-learning, MOOCs, social networks used for didactic and educational purposes, and many more.

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The spread of digitization processes in education, where online platforms play a central role, brings out new methods and practices of teaching and learning, unrelated to the traditional spatiality and temporality of education (van Dijck et al., 2018). However, these digital products/artefacts are not only a new form of mediation in the teaching and learning processes, but can also play an important role in the governance, evaluation and monitoring of education systems (Kogan & Hanney, 2000; Landri, 2018).

The complexity of platform education's implications—which go beyond education to touch on broader social matters—urges scholars and researchers to conceptualize and define the notion more precisely, establishing the boundaries of its semantic field, identifying its specificities, and distinguishing between the different types of platform according to their origin, uses and purposes.

This contribution aims to offer critical reflections on implications deriving from the so-called 'platform education'. Starting from the general notion of 'platformization', its application in the field of education first in a global context, and subsequently in a local context, will be illustrated. Therefore, this chapter has been structured as described below. In the background section, "Platform education: an overview of the issues and debate", by means of a review of the literature, the definition and features of the social phenomenon called 'platformization' will be offered. In its the second subsection the characteristics of the use of the technological platform specifically designed for teaching and learning will be listed. In the following two subsections, "Platform education: a cross-national focus", and "Platform education: focus on the Italian school system", attention will be paid to secondary scenario data, to understand, from an international point of view and with a particular focus on Italy, how widespread platform education is, who uses it, in which stages of schooling cycles it is applied and for what purpose, and which data sources are most reliable in this connection. In the section "Issues, controversies, and critical reflexions", following an analysis of the main theoretical and empirical data, will be presented a reflection on the implications, viz., the observable or foreseeable consequences of the spread of education platform. Lastly, some concluding remarks will be presented.

METHODOLOGICAL NOTES

The purpose of this contribution is to carry out a systematic and critical review of literature and empirical research on the topic of the diffusion of platforms for educational use. Since this is a very large field of study, the authors have limited the area of investigation according to temporal and spatial criteria. Therefore, regarding time, the focus is on the last ten years as they are most relevant in the emergence of educational platforms. Secondly, regarding space only the countries of the European Union have been considered. As such, the consulted main data sources are those only referring them. Indeed, the common directives and guidelines, which can allow a reliable comparison between countries. However, the variability between national school systems and different degrees of investment in teaching through platforms is not negligible.

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