

Editorial. Promoting social inclusion through educational technology

Editoriale. Promuovere l'inclusione sociale attraverso le tecnologie didattiche

Vito Pipitone^{A*} and Giovanni Fulantelli^B

A) Institute for Studies on the Mediterranean (ISMed), National Research Council, Organizational Unit at LUMSA University, Palermo, Italy, vito.pipitone@ismed.cnr.it*

B) Institute for Educational Technology, National Research Council, Palermo, Italy, giovanni.fulantelli@itd.cnr.it

*corresponding author

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One hundred and thirteen million people in the European Union, equal to 22.4% of the total population, are at risk of poverty and social exclusion. This fact is found in the recent 2019 Eurostat report entitled “*Smarter, greener, more inclusive? Indicators to support the Europe 2020 strategy*”.

Poverty and social exclusion can take many forms. Naturally, available income constitutes one of the most important determinants of a population’s living standards. There are other aspects, however, that shape individuals’ level of participation in society, and thus their degree of social exclusion, such as access to labour markets and material deprivation.

Compared to the European average, the risk of poverty and social exclusion is greater for certain groups: women, young people, those with disabilities, and immigrants. In particular, for people born outside the European Union, the risk of poverty and social exclusion is as high as 38.3%, twice that of the native-born population. Multiple factors contribute to this heightened risk, including lower average education levels, difficulties in language and communication, and other barriers to accessing labour markets.

The European Union first introduced the objective of social inclusion and reduction of poverty risk among the eleven priorities in its Cohesion Policy 2014-2020. This objective will continue to be pursued in the cohesion policy for 2021-2027. In this new cycle of economic planning, the European Union commits itself to promoting targeted social policy, while respecting the skills and capacities of individuals.

Attention to poverty and social exclusion has its cultural and ethical roots in the European and Christian tradition of freedom, equality and justice, but is also supported by economic arguments connected with the efficiency of systems and their capacity to grow over the long term. The higher the levels of poverty and social exclusion in a society, the lower its marginal propensity to consume will be. This condition widens the gap between the growth of productive capacity and that of aggregate demand. The stress that it produces increases uncertainty, thus negatively impacting the medium- and long-term decisions of all economic actors.

With regard to a multi-dimensional phenomenon like poverty and social exclusion, it is necessary to employ a host of policies and instruments, both to support the disposable income of individuals and to promote their capacities, opportunities and personal dignity. Leading everyone towards greater participa-

tion in society means, in concrete terms, granting them greater access to education and training, health services, labour markets, and political participation.

With the spread of new information technologies in our lives, these instruments have become strategic allies for reducing the barriers to full social inclusion. In our view, the remarkable, ever-new variety of modern digital technologies is one of the most important means for reducing social exclusion.

In this issue of IJET, we seek to encourage reflection on the possible link between new technology and the process of social inclusion. The idea is that this link can strongly influence the future well-being of European society. For example, the use of digital technology in distance learning offers a way for transmitting knowledge and skills, but also a means for building a new, more equitable and more cohesive society.

The experiences described in the pages of this issue pursue a double objective: that of reflecting on the role of technology in the process of social inclusion, and that of sharing ideas, methodologies and instruments. Being experimental in nature, they primarily seek to spark discussion and to demonstrate the many potential benefits that new technology can offer.

Robert Farrow's article offers a short overview of the literature on the possibilities that open online learning offers for fostering the process of social inclusion in labour markets. As the author stresses, there is strong evidence that by promoting continuing education and professional development, online learning can make a significant contribution to social inclusion in the European Union. However, participation in these forms of education is generally limited to privileged groups. For this reason, Farrow suggests that it would be best to reconsider these new learning tools in a more inclusive way, taking into account psycho-physical, socio-cultural, language and economic disadvantages.

The article by *Valeria Damiani and Gabriella Agrusti* also discusses the development of online learning. The authors describe the results of an action-study that aimed to develop e-learning tools for developing the language skills of immigrants in relation to key areas for social inclusion, such as employment, health and continuing education.

Similarly, the contribution from *Fabrizio Ravicchio, Giorgio Robino and Simone Torsani* discusses language training for immigrants. They present the results of an experiment that led to the development of a conversation partner (chat-bot), available on mobile devices, which serves as a teaching assistant for semi-literate or illiterate immigrants. The article highlights the importance of simulated conversation for learning the host-country language, and how this skill is a precondition for all processes of social integration. The importance and prevalence of mobile phones among immigrants attending Italy's Provincial Centers for Adult Education is examined in depth in the article by *Denise Tonelli*. The author highlights the pervasiveness of this tool and, accordingly, emphasises the importance of considering new forms of learning that take into account the various new technological skills of young and adult immigrants.

The contribution from *Lidia Scifo, Ornella Asaro and Agata Maltese* reflects on how the use of traditional technologies can become an instrument of social inclusion. The authors present the results of an 11-year study that aimed to support the process of social inclusion of young mothers and second-generation immigrants, a process built on renewed appreciation for identity, personal history and future aspirations.

The articles published here are naturally a starting point for further reflection, and we hope that this seed of reflection may grow into a broader debate on the future of our (inclusive) European Union.