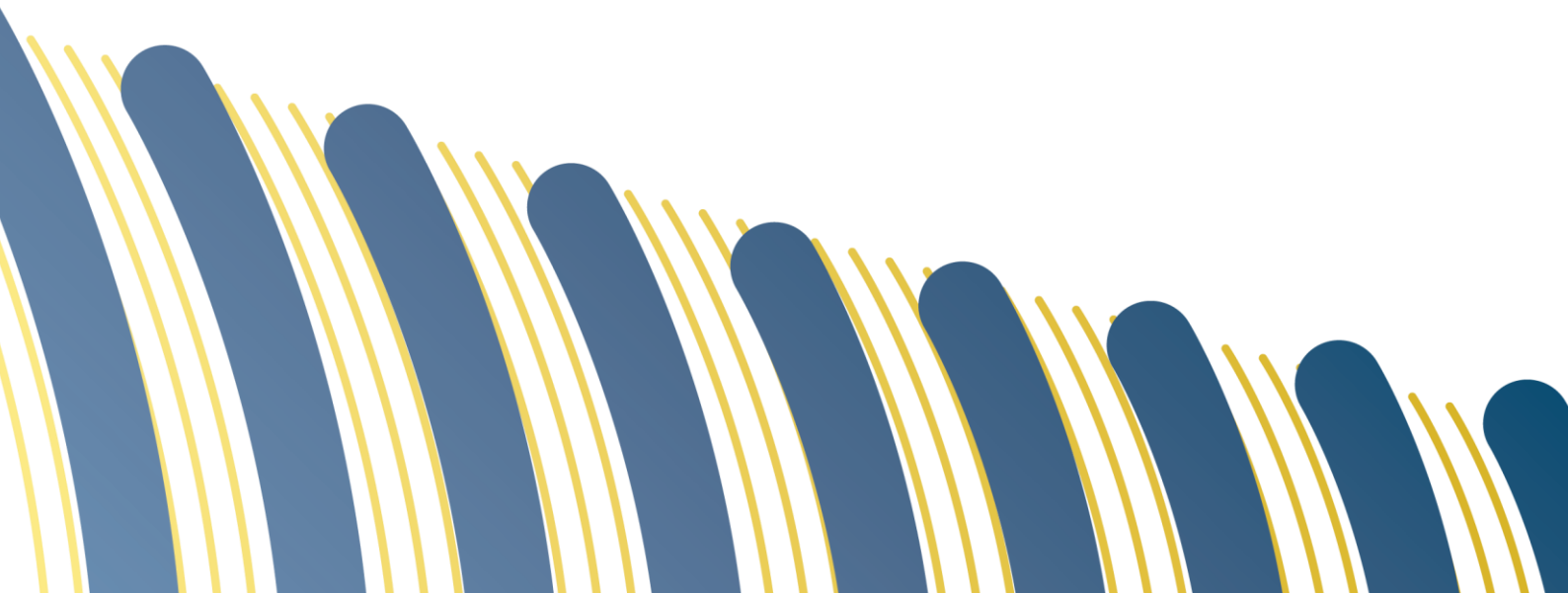


Teachers' digital well-being in 21st century schools



EUN innovat**ED**

Summary of webinar held in November 2023



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About the EUN InnovatED webinar series

This 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



Evangelia Dimaraki is a learning consultant specialising in designing and orchestrating learning experiences to foster inquiry, engagement, and creativity. She has a EdD. in Instructional Technology and Media from Columbia University. Reviewing the growing literature on digital well-being resulted in designing a [week-long course](#) on offer through Europass Teacher Academy, to help teachers understand this challenge and to offer them tools for fostering the digital well-being of their students and themselves.



Don Passey, Professor of Technology Enhanced Learning, Director of International Strategy in the Department of Educational Research at Lancaster University, UK. Widely published, his research interests concern how digital technologies support inclusive learning and teaching, and innovative and inclusive practices. Recent studies have explored how digital technologies can influence teacher well-being, and how parents and carers are engaging with children's learning.

This webinar, the first of two on the topic of digital well-being (the second covering students' well-being), was chaired by Konstantinos Andronikidis of European Schoolnet. Participants discussed three questions:

- What do we mean by teachers' digital well-being?
- What are the main challenges teachers face concerning digital well-being?
- Which strategies enhance teachers' digital wellbeing?

What do we mean by teachers' digital well-being?

Responding to this first question, **Don Passey** argued that the term 'teachers' digital well-being', although necessary, is not yet clearly defined and not always useful because it has been developed in a rather exclusive way, referring to how effectively teachers might be using digital technologies. Instead, he suggested that the definition should be viewed in the wider concept of teacher well-being. He suggested that it would be better to consider how technology supports teachers' "competence, relatedness, and autonomy" (Deci and Ryan, 2001), and how technology can motivate them.

"Motivation plays a huge part in in the whole concept of teacher well-being and it's a question therefore of how digital technologies are supporting that motivation. How are [teachers] motivated and when are they motivated?" – Don Passey

Don Passey suggested that teachers' digital well-being should therefore be linked to questions such as "are teachers more motivated when they use technology?", "how do teachers engage and support young people?", and "how do teachers view the success of young people, the key to their own motivation to teach?".

Evangelia Dimaraki argued that teachers' digital well-being is connected to a broader societal issue; the increased use of digital technology is affecting people's concentration and energy. She considered attention to be the core of the issue and argued that attention is essentially what defines the quality of our experience and that, as it is a very limited and finite resource, one should not take it for granted. She linked teachers' digital well-being to the problems emerging when the finite and limited resource of attention turns into an economic resource. In her view, attention is both valuable to us for the quality of our lives [and] a very important economic value for tech companies.

"The reason we need to talk about digital well-being, the reason that digital well-being is an issue in our lives, is because we are living within an attention economy that builds on our real practical or psychological needs and diverts them to exploit it for financial gain." – Evangelia Dimaraki

Evangelia Dimaraki said that there are two sides to the issue. On the one hand, "technology has become the water we swim in", as it has become "all things to all people, all the time", and on the other hand "we are using [digital] applications for our own purposes, but these applications also have purposes of their

own which are misaligned with our goals and can degrade our everyday experience". It is, therefore, she argued, both a personal problem that relates to our agency and how we are going to organise our lives and an institutional problem in education that raises the question of what protections we have in place to protect the digital well-being of teachers and students.

In discussion, a participant asked if it is meaningful to use the term 'digital well-being' at all or whether one should focus on well-being in general. **Don Passey** responded that it is important to continue using the term as it relates to specific areas such as teachers' competence in using digital technologies, but that teachers' digital well-being should be considered under the wider concept of teacher well-being, as it is connected to teachers' work-life balance which is affected by digital technology. For him, digital technology creates a boundary blurring between professional and personal life as it is much harder now to delineate time as a teacher and time as a private individual. Some teachers, he argued, believe this is to the benefit of their work while others disagree. Digital well-being as a concept is important because it talks about this idea of how you handle the technology, what you do with it and how you benefit from it when you have an understanding of what it can do for you. This blurring ultimately leads to an information and communication explosion which can create an overload for many teachers. He underlined the need to have technologies developed and designed - specifically for education purposes instead of being adapted-.

Evangelia Dimaraki agreed, stressing that the term digital well-being is important because technology has created a situation where most human activities cannot be separated into digital or real life but rather fall into the 'hybrid life' category. By keeping the word 'digital', she argued, we are reminded that we should start insisting on having technology that supports and protects the well-being of its users. In focusing on digital well-being, one can advocate for technologies, especially those used in education, that protect users from exploitative behaviours such as persuasive design which is used in many digital applications to keep users engaged more and for longer.

What are the main challenges teachers face concerning digital well-being?

Responding to this second question, **Evangelia Dimaraki** focused on challenges relating to concentration, memory, and mental health. She said that frequent focus switching, constant cortisol response, loss of a feeling of agency, and constant availability can impact the digital -and general- well-being of teachers. In particular, she argued that, in most cases, when one uses a particular application "all kinds of other things are happening on our screen that are trying to catch our attention". The result is that users are constantly making small decisions about whether to switch focus. Even when reading a digital document, a link to a reference is not something that can be considered following sometime in the future, but instead one can click on it right now and thus it becomes a decision. In this way, performance on a particular task is affected since concentration is dispersed across different smaller disruptions which ultimately also leads to a greater feeling of exhaustion.

“What we are dealing with is technologies where all kinds of different applications and all kinds of different services are vying for our attention.” –
Evangelia Dimaraki

For Evangelia Dimaraki constant cortisol response is another threat to teachers' digital well-being: “New things are popping up that may or may not be important: red dots, sounds, message alerts with a sense of urgency” and therefore create stress. This stress might be low level, but it is constant and affects one's mental health. Technology is competing with activities that actually contribute to our well-being, such as being out in nature or being with friends, with our family and is often designed to distract us from other activities because of this competition. Teachers also increasingly report, a sense of losing agency to technology a sense of being disempowered by the way the technology is introduced. They often feel top-down pressure to digitise and adopt an enthusiastic approach to technology without being able to share their opinions or misgivings about certain policies or changes.

“There's the idea of the digital transition that emphasises and demands an enthusiastic approach to technology and makes people feel that their misgivings are their own, and that nobody else has misgivings.” –
Evangelia Dimaraki

Participant **Tony Weir**, (Education inspector) suggested three levels of responsibility to support this agency: the designer of the technology, school authorities, and teachers themselves. Teachers should be responsible for making themselves sufficiently competent and proficient in the use of any of these technologies so that they can limit the effect these technologies can have on their well-being. This indirect pressure, coupled with an increased workload also affects teacher well-being.

Evangelia Dimaraki said that many times the increased workload doesn't necessarily mean that the quality of the teaching is better, or the quality of the of the learning is better, or the atmosphere in the school is better which can be really demoralising for some. This also contributes to the pressure to suggest that if a teacher struggles with technology it is because they are resistant to technology or a technophobe. She argued that constant availability, a trend that has become established after the COVID19 pandemic, has created many problems for teachers, many reporting that students expect them to be available to respond to them at any time of the day, including after school hours.

Don Passey listed three main challenges: information overload, communication overload, and teachers' perceptions about the impact of technology on their well-being. He suggested that because technology can reduce reliance on memory, “we're becoming more reliant upon technology, because if we're not relying on our memories”. In his view, this means that we're relying upon digital devices for our memory and therefore we're turning to digital technologies more as a result of not memorising to the same extent. The communication overload relates to the increasing phenomenon of people not being able to get away from their mobile devices and constantly being available to communicate with parents, students, or other colleagues. Teachers often do not fully understand the impact of technology on their well-being,

according to Don Passey, and so they are not actively thinking about the challenges technology can bring and how to overcome them.

“Teachers don't tend to think about how technology affects their physical, social, and psychological well-being. It's not something that they consciously think about.” – Don Passey

Paolo Haaland Scarbocci, (University of Stavanger) commented that one of the challenges he identified is how to respond to the shifting reality that technology creates, for example, always being online and available, and the extra needs for upskilling and training it creates: “I think people sometimes forget that you can ‘mute yourself’. We take it for granted that kids will understand and develop an understanding themselves of how all these be the different media function.”

Tony Weir said that agency is the key. As an inspector he has observed that older teachers tend to feel more that they lack agency and that these new technologies have been forced upon them and that they don't quite know how to control them in terms of being connected and contactable all the time. He asked who is responsible for giving the teacher agency: the software designer, to enable agency by default, the school authorities, or teachers themselves “to make themselves sufficiently competent and proficient in the use of any of these technologies so that they can limit how they're used and limit the reach of these technologies impacting on their wellbeing? Somebody has to provide agency for the teachers.”

Paolo Haaland Scarbocci agreed, saying that if you just sit back and hope that someone else will make the decision, as if the digital world is not connected to your own life but something on the side that's forced on you, “you will always feel that you're forced to do something that's not part of you yourself”.

Responding, **Don Passey** pointed out that there is much more research about the problems being caused rather than the potential benefits that might arise and that, in education, “we've become accustomed to being consumers with regard to technology and not being developed in terms of being producers. If we want to tackle teacher agency, we have to tackle this issue of how we can encourage teachers to be producers as well as consumers.”

Evangelia- Dimaraki said that we talk about technology as if it's like gravity whereas in fact we have “more agency than we exercise”. It's a question of establishing a balance between what we can control and what we cannot, such as the school system or how technology is designed.

Which strategies enhance teachers' digital wellbeing?

Addressing the question of strategies, **Don Passey** said that the key is to think about the variety of uses of digital technologies and what that means in terms of helping teachers develop individual agency: “Why shouldn't there be differences across schools and within a school? Don't let's go along the line of a strategy where there's a single answer to this and that there's a single way of handling it.”

Evangelia- Dimaraki asserted that we do have some agency and have to become aware of where our agency is: She argued that there are three strategies: First, awareness: knowing that digital well-being is a

problem, that the attention economy exists, knowing the persuasive design exists, and knowing that that has effects on our life. Second, not to struggle alone: “We have been too pressured by the demand to be enthusiastic about technology to be able to talk about the struggles we’re having with technology, both personally and professionally.” It is important to treat digital well-being not as a topic to be discussed once only, but to build it into all the decisions we make about technology. The third strategy is to designate technology free time or space in schools that have low tech projects and that introduce ways of doing things and being competent without technology, “a time or place where you step out of technology so you can look at it critically and renegotiate your relationship with it”.

“We are the last generation of people who have lived without digital technology and we have the chance to do that.” - Evangelia- Dimaraki

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