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A "Selfie" to improve e-learning in schools

Discovering the free EU tool made available to schools to improve the use of digital technologies for learning

A "self-timer" to help schools improve learning strategies in the digital age. This is the aim of the project developed by the **European Commission** to allow schools to self-assess their digital skills and to improve the exploitation of learning and teaching strategies. In recent years, in fact, the use of technologies in digital systems is showing its usefulness and effectiveness also for teaching at all school levels.

One of the main demonstrations of the importance of **e-learning** was offered by Covid-19: with the spread of the new coronavirus pandemic in Europe and around the world, primary and secondary schools and universities have had to resort to distance learning, and digital learning has become the preferred option in many institutions. But although schools have shown readiness to embrace digital education, there remains a need to consolidate resilience and innovation to ensure that learning environments keep pace with the digital age.

To do so, the European Union has decided to provide institutions with a tool to help them monitor and improve their engagement and interest in digital content. As the European Education Platform explains, " **Selfie**" is available to all primary, secondary and vocational schools in Europe and can be used in over 30 languages.

What is "Selfie"?

The name "Selfie" refers to the practice of taking a picture of oneself, which has become widespread, especially in recent decades, thanks to the introduction of cameras in cell phones. The tool made available free of charge by the European Commission, in fact, is useful for schools to get a picture of their situation in the field of digital technologies in education, so as to evaluate and improve their use for learning. "Selfie," however, also stands for Self-reflection on Effective Learning by Fostering the use of Innovative Educational technologies, that is, self-reflection on effective learning by promoting the use of innovative educational technologies. It is a tool designed "to help schools incorporate digital technologies into teaching, learning, and assessment."

"Selfie" is a **free tool available to every school**, funded through the Erasmus program, that aims to collect the opinions of students, teachers and staff to understand how digital practices are being used in their school. The tool is customizable by each institution, easy to configure and private, as it does not collect personal data and leaves all responses provided by school staff and students anonymous. Only the school using the tool, in fact, can keep track of the answers, an activity not allowed even to the European Commission, nor to other organizations.

The program was tested in several schools and involved school leaders, teachers and students, who also contributed to the design of the tool. Specifically, as **explained by the European Commission**, 5,000 staff and students were involved in the project in terms of design, while another 67,000 people from 650 European schools took part in the pilot test. "Selfie," moreover, was tested in elementary school, to ensure its applicability in this area as well and to demonstrate its comprehension by younger students. The tool is not intended to examine or compare individual schools, but is intended for self-assessment, for improvement in the use of technology in education. Although "Selfie" is designed to measure and reflect on the use of e-learning in education and training systems, the tool is intended for every school, not just the most digitally advanced ones.

How does "Selfie" work?

As illustrated, the purpose of the instrument is to **collect the opinions of students**, teachers, and staff about the use of digital technology within their school. This is done using short statements or questions, which participants are asked to answer by assigning a number on a scale of 1-5. The time required to complete the questionnaire is approximately 20 to 30 minutes. On the basis of the answers provided by pupils and teachers, the tool generates a report, which provides a snapshot (a self-timer) of the school's strengths and weaknesses, as far as digital learning is concerned.

But how do you actually introduce "Selfie" in your school? The European Commission provides the necessary information to accompany anyone who wants to start using the tool made available for free. To use the tool, the following steps must be taken:

1. **Identify** a person or small group to coordinate the activity;
2. **Register** your school on the SELFIE platform, providing the main information, the timing of the activity and the type of participants;
3. **Customize** the questions based on your school's needs and context;
4. **Invite** students, teachers, and staff to participate and answer the questions, all anonymously and for the duration of approximately 30 minutes;
5. Obtain the **results** for your school, which can be consulted on the report generated by "Selfie" automatically at the end of the answers given by the participants. The results are anonymous and only the school concerned can access them;
6. **Discuss** the results, to identify gaps related to digital practices for teaching and understand which ones might be useful for student learning and assessment. Next, develop an action plan, in which the school's goals and how to achieve them are established;
7. **Refine** your progress by repeating the assessment periodically so that you can check the effectiveness of the action plan or consider changes to it.

Why is it useful?

"Selfie" can be a useful tool for primary and secondary schools because it allows them to investigate and evaluate the use of digital strategies within individual institutions. In this way, the tool can help school leaders and teachers understand where to implement the use of digital to support learning and teaching. "Selfie" is able to engage students, teachers and leaders in a collective reflection on the benefits that digital offers to teaching and learning and where their institution stands in this regard. The results provided by the report automatically generated by the tool, at the end of the response collection phase, can bring out several points to evaluate and reason about. The questionnaire, for example, can highlight the areas in which technology is being used effectively and those in which the school can improve; it can shed light on the teachers' approach to training and the school's vision for the use of digital teaching; and the skills of staff and students in this area. Finally, "Selfie" can get people thinking about areas to allocate funding to.

In essence, "Selfie" can help schools understand how digital practices and strategies are being applied to teaching, learning, and assessment and make decisions to improve and implement the use of e-learning.

Where did the project come from?

The "Selfie" tool was developed starting from the considerations of the **European Commission**, set out in **Promoting Effective Digital-Age Learning**, which presented the European Reference Framework for Digitally Competent Educational Organizations (DigCompOrg), an analysis of existing situations and self-assessment questionnaires that "promote the integration of digital technologies in education and training systems at national/international level".

The Commission document emphasized the importance in the digital age of learning that recognizes how all aspects of life, from work to study and leisure, take place in a digitized, Internet-connected world. In this digital age, learning is a challenge and the transition from traditional education to e-learning is among the goals of European states. "It is essential-explains the document-that organizations modernize teaching and learning practices," in order to understand the potential of digital training as key factors in the development of new knowledge experiences.

DigCompOrg was conceived for three reasons:

- To lay the groundwork for the production of self-assessment tools for educational organizations;
- To offer tools to facilitate the integration of technology into educational systems;
- To inspire self-assessment questionnaires, including in specific areas.

The next phase of the project involved the creation of an online tool, the "Selfie" in fact, for primary, secondary and vocational schools, which would allow their self-assessment, built on the basis of the eight areas to be examined identified by DigCompOrg. The "Selfie" questions, therefore, are based on the following areas of digital education:

1. **Leadership**'s use of digital technologies for school integration and their effective use in the school's core functions, which include teaching and learning;
2. The steps taken by the school to support **networked collaborations and interactions** that are useful for sharing experiences and methods for effective learning;
3. The reliability, adequacy, and security of **infrastructure and equipment**, such as software, internet network, and digital tools, that would facilitate digital learning;
4. The school's ongoing investment in the **professional development** of its staff. Ongoing professional development supports the integration of new ways of teaching and learning, which have digital technologies at their core, to achieve better results;
5. The use of **digital tools** and resources, to update and innovate ways of teaching;
6. The **classroom implementation** of digital technologies aimed at learning;
7. **Assessment practices** that can help schools move beyond a traditional view of assessment, moving them toward the use of digital technologies and customized to the student;
8. **Student digital competence**, understood as the set of skills, knowledge, and attitudes that enable students in each school to use digital technologies with confidence and creativity.

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