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DIGITAL COMPETENCIES AND
VIRTUAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS:
A STATE OF THE ART

COMPETENCIAS DIGITALES Y ENTORNOS
VIRTUALES DE APRENDIZAJE:
UN ESTADO DEL ARTE



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DIGITAL COMPETENCIES AND VIRTUAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS: A STATE OF THE ART

COMPETENCIAS DIGITALES Y ENTORNOS VIRTUALES DE APRENDIZAJE: UN ESTADO DEL ARTE

ABSTRACT

This paper presents a literature review aimed at identifying the main themes underpinning research related to students' digital competencies, virtual learning environments, educational platforms, and instructional design. The study focused on a bibliographic analysis of research published between 2010 and 2020, incorporating relevant contributions from national, Latin American, and international contexts. The information search was conducted in various academic databases and digital repositories, considering scientific articles, theses, and specialized books. This process allowed for the contextualization and theoretical grounding of the study, as well as guiding the design of a pilot course based on an instructional design model.

Keywords: digital competencies, virtual learning environments, digital education, educational platforms instructional design

RESUMEN

El presente trabajo corresponde a una revisión de literatura orientada a identificar los ejes principales que sustentan una investigación relacionada con las competencias digitales en estudiantes, los entornos virtuales de aprendizaje, las plataformas educativas y el diseño instruccional. El estudio se centró en un análisis bibliográfico de investigaciones publicadas entre 2010 y 2020, integrando aportaciones relevantes en los ámbitos nacional, latinoamericano e internacional. La búsqueda de información se realizó en diversas bases de datos académicas y repositorios digitales, considerando artículos científicos, tesis y libros especializados. Este proceso permitió contextualizar y fundamentar teóricamente el estudio, así como orientar el diseño de un curso piloto basado en un modelo de diseño instruccional.

Palabras clave: competencias digitales, entornos virtuales de aprendizaje, educación digital, plataformas educativas, diseño instruccional

1. INTRODUCTION

In today's educational landscape, the integration of information and communication technologies (ICT) has significantly transformed teaching dynamics and access to information. This process has created a need to understand students' digital competencies in order to design effective and context-specific educational strategies. Various authors agree that digital competencies are essential skills for navigating a changing digital environment. However, they are not limited to the technical use of tools but include the understanding, evaluation, and critical application of information. For example, Tejada Fernández and Ruiz Bueno (2016) defined digital competencies as the critical and reflective ability to use ICT, encompassing access, analysis, evaluation, and management of information, as well as collaborative participation in digital society.

Along the same lines, Sánchez and Sureda (2010) proposed a comprehensive vision that ranges from information literacy to media literacy, highlighting the importance of searching for, organizing, and communicating information in an ethical and efficient manner. On the other hand, Marquès Graells (2016) highlighted these competencies as a set of skills that enable students to learn, work, and actively participate in the digital society, emphasizing the ethical and efficient use of information. These definitions reflect an evolution in the conception of digital competencies, adapting to technological and social advancements..

Cabero-Almenara and Palacios-Rodríguez (2020) analyzed the strengths and weaknesses of students' technological proficiency in digital educational contexts. Their study recognizes digital competencies as fundamental to 21st-century education, highlighting the need to develop them in virtual learning environments (VLEs). Similarly, Caballero Montero et al. (2022) explored the relationship between virtual learning strategies and digital competence among university students in Lima, Peru. These authors defined digital competence as a cognitive process that facilitates the transmission of knowledge through ICT. To this end, they used questionnaires in *Google Forms* and found that students demonstrated an average level on both variables.

Huerta Soto et al. (2022) studied the relationship between university instructors' digital competencies and student satisfaction during the pandemic; the study was conducted by the National University of the Altiplano in Puno, Peru (UNA Puno). Using a quantitative approach and a correlational design, validated instruments were administered to 290 students. The results showed a significant relationship between teaching competencies and student satisfaction ($p=0.000$), indicating that teachers are equipped to conduct effective learning activities in virtual environments. Contreras Pardo and Vera Sagredo (2022) addressed digital citizenship education in secondary school. With 138 students, they implemented an ICT-based instructional sequence, analyzing the data using *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences* (SPSS). The results showed that students recognize digital media as facilitators of access to information and civic participation. It was concluded that these strategies promote the development of competencies for informed and responsible participation.

Similarly, Ramírez Villasana (2021) investigated the digital migration of Peruvian institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on the relationship between digital skills and academic performance among technical students. They administered a validated questionnaire to 52 students in the *Computer Operations* program. Forty-six percent and 44% achieved good or higher levels in skills and performance, respectively, revealing a positive correlation (0.572). It is concluded that higher digital skills promote academic performance. Finally, it is evident that today's education has been transformed by ICT, requiring students to develop digital skills as the foundation for academic and professional success in a global and technological environment.

In this context, it is clear that contemporary education has been profoundly influenced by advances in ICT, which requires students to develop digital competencies that enable them to successfully meet the academic, professional, and social challenges of an increasingly digitized environment. Consequently, the objective of this article is to analyze the state of the art regarding the development of digital competencies and the use of e-learning in the educational field, with the aim of identifying the main contributions, trends, and challenges associated with the integration of digital technologies into teaching and learning processes.

2. DEVELOPMENT OF THE TOPIC

Before beginning the research, a review of the relevant literature was conducted, which allowed us to identify three key areas: students' digital competencies, e-learning, and instructional design. These elements form the basis for the proposal to develop an online model, taking into account the digital competencies demonstrated by students. The literature review revealed that studies on digital competencies exist and that MOOCs are a common option at various educational levels. Additionally, instructional design was identified as an essential component in the planning of online courses. The objective of this section is to provide an updated overview of relevant prior research, facilitating the identification of significant contributions related to the topic. To this end, the search focused on the concepts of digital competencies, MOOCs, instructional design, and educational platforms. Although it was initially challenging to define the key areas, the process allowed for the identification of useful terms and concepts that strengthened the study's focus.

The selection of sources included scientific articles, theses, books, and conference papers related to the phenomenon under investigation. The search was conducted in academic databases, repositories, and online resources, and studies at the national, Latin American, and international levels were considered, covering the period from 2010 to 2020. Although the initial plan was to include only recent research (from the past five years), earlier works were also incorporated due to their value and relevance. In conclusion, the literature review was key to defining the study's structure, allowing us to establish the theoretical frameworks from which the research will be approached: digital competencies in students, virtual environments, and instructional design, as presented below.

2.1. Digital skills in an educational context

First, focusing on digital literacy, the term has been introduced into educational settings and is now part of the curriculum in various countries. It is a concept with multiple meanings, considered one of the pillars of educational change at the national and international levels. Likewise, these competencies are defined as the critical and safe use of Information Society Technologies for work, leisure, and communication. These include the use of computers to retrieve, evaluate, store, produce, present, and exchange information, and to communicate and participate in collaborative networks via the internet (Diario Oficial de la Unión Europea, 2006).

Furthermore, Fernández (2016) analyzed how the integration of ICT in secondary education contributes to the development of digital competence. He identified positive changes at the organizational level, but no significant methodological transformation. Students, moreover, are still at an early stage in terms of this competence. Similarly, Rozo García (2016) conducted qualitative research in Colombia to determine whether writing review articles strengthens digital competence in information management. The study yielded positive results, concluding that the strategy provided a real and clear exercise in which students recognized the importance of information management, thereby strengthening their digital skills.

Similarly, Vázquez-Cano et al. (2017) assessed students at the Catholic University of Santiago in Guayaquil, Ecuador, and concluded that, although students consider themselves competent in web navigation and search engine use, their performance is significantly lower when it comes to using *Quick Response* (QR) codes and working with images using social media tools and/or applications. These findings highlight the need for teaching strategies that address these gaps.

At the national level, Guzmán Games and Velázquez (2020) conducted a study with Indigenous and mestizo students at the Intercultural University of the State of Puebla, Mexico. They administered the *Perception and Use of ICTs* questionnaire and found that the adoption of digital literacy was still in its early stages. In other words, access to digital infrastructure is necessary but insufficient when there is no associated technological literacy. In this regard, Carrasco Lozano et al. (2015) studied master's students in education to identify their level of digital competencies. They found that, although there are few differences between genders, it is necessary for the master's program to include the development of digital competencies in its curriculum, given that current processes require graduate students to possess these skills so as not to be excluded.

On the other hand, Sánchez-Macías and Veytia-Bucheli (2018) assessed the level of digital competence among doctoral students. They concluded that doctoral students do not possess a higher level of digital competence simply because they are at this educational level. Furthermore, they noted that gender is not a determining factor either. They also identified tensions between international policies and the reality in classrooms, where even basic technological resources are sometimes lacking.

Consequently, Fernández Miravete (2018) assessed the self-perception of fourth-year secondary school students in a 1:1 ICT project after four years of implementation. He concluded that students in the digital learning model perceive themselves as more digitally competent than those in the traditional learning model, outperforming them in most areas. Meanwhile, Palomé-Vega et al. (2020) analyzed the impact of *b-learning* on nursing students at the Autonomous University of Querétaro, Mexico. They found that the use of *b-learning* had an impact on digital competencies and that the greatest impact was observed among women in Dimension 1 (technological literacy). In this regard, this modality fosters the development of digital competencies and promotes collaborative work.

Similarly, Bordas Beltrán et al. (2020) compared perceptions of digital competencies among students and faculty at the Autonomous University of Chihuahua, Mexico. According to their findings, students possess a good level of basic digital competencies. The challenge arises with complex competencies, such as application, in-depth understanding, collaborative work, and ethics. The observed phenomenon is similar to the development of language competencies. Finally, from the faculty perspective, Sandia Saldivia et al. (2018) investigated the level of ICT adoption among faculty at the University of Los Andes in Colombia. They concluded that faculty members perceive themselves as having an integrative level of adoption in the area of communication, explorers in the technological area, and innovators in the pedagogical area. Differences were also observed by faculty and academic level, indicating that employment status and level of academic training are directly and significantly related to technological and teaching competencies.

In summary, the integration of digital skills into education has become essential. The reviewed research shows progress in the digital literacy and skills of students and teachers, as well as limitations that call for innovative methodologies. It is clear that digital literacy goes beyond access to technology, requiring active educational strategies that address the needs of the 21st century and ensure a comprehensive digital education.

2.2. Virtual Learning Environments: An Approach to Teaching and Learning

A second pillar underpinning this research is the VLE, which is defined as an educational space hosted on the *web*, consisting of a set of computer tools that facilitate educational interaction (Salinas, 2011). The definition of these environments indicates that they have both a technological dimension and an educational dimension, which are interrelated. Thus, the technological dimension is represented by the computer tools or applications used to build the environment. As for the educational dimension of a VLE, it is represented by the teaching-learning process that takes place within it (Salinas, 2011).

Thus, in an international context, there is a journal article titled *Shared Virtual Learning Environment in Higher Education*, which explains how there is a growing demand for virtual platforms based on the *Web 2.0* concept and Personal Learning Networks (PLNs), which facilitate dialogue among educational stakeholders and collaboration aimed at the joint production of knowledge. From this approach, the EVA emerged, where new applications adapted to users' needs are configured, integrated, and combined. The aforementioned EVA was tested, implemented, and

evaluated during the second semester, within the framework of the General Didactics course at the Faculty of Education Sciences of the University of Seville, Spain, during the 2009–2010 academic year; and a survey conducted reveals interesting findings regarding the success of this shared virtual environment in relation to student motivation and learning outcomes (Rodríguez Gallego & López Martínez, 2013).

Furthermore, at the national level, Edel-Navarro (2010) explained that the study of ICT and the internet, and their relationship to the educational process, represent two key areas of knowledge regarding online learning environments. Furthermore, understanding virtualization in the educational process and the appropriation and transformation of educational virtuality requires delving deeper into the nature of differentiated and/or emerging learning environments, assessing the contribution of the virtual to educational innovation, and evaluating its impact on educational processes. Therefore, it should be recognized as a relevant subject of study in Mexico and Latin America. The topic is of current interest to higher education institutions. This generates knowledge about the use and contribution of digital resources, which will enable them to systematize the development of digital skills (Peña, 2009).

Similarly, in the study presented by Ayil Carrillo (2018), which aims to design a virtual learning environment (VLE) facilitated by the *Moodle* learning management system as a support tool for teaching mathematics at the secondary education level, it seeks innovation with the aim of revitalizing mathematics instruction and ensuring that students play a more active role by engaging in interactive exercises that capture their attention, so that through a virtual environment, students can achieve meaningful learning. In the same study, VLEs were defined as spaces that encourage students and teachers to interact and engage with one another to fulfill their roles; for this reason, digitization in the field of education promotes the development of virtual teaching and learning environments, which serve as spaces where learning resources are readily available (Borges Sáiz, 2007).

In conclusion, VLEs represent a fundamental innovation in the field of education, integrating both technological and pedagogical dimensions. These digital spaces, which are based on *web* platforms and interactive tools, not only facilitate the teaching-learning process but also foster collaboration and the joint production of knowledge. In the international context, as in the case of the University of Seville, Spain, EVAs have been shown to have a positive impact on student motivation and performance, promoting active and meaningful learning.

At the national level, there is a growing need in countries such as Mexico and throughout Latin America to further explore the study and application of virtual learning environments (VLEs), given their potential to drive innovation in higher education. This includes not only the use of tools such as *Moodle*, but also the design of interactive experiences that actively engage students in the learning process, as is the case with mathematics instruction in secondary school. In this regard, VLEs are establishing themselves as spaces for educational interaction that facilitate knowledge construction and the development of digital competencies among students. These virtual environments have proven effective in adapting to the needs of the contemporary educational context,

and their implementation can significantly enrich learning across various disciplines, fostering the development of digital skills and promoting greater student engagement in their own educational process.

3. CONCLUSIONS

The literature review conducted as part of the state-of-the-art analysis provides a detailed overview of the progress and challenges in the development of digital competencies and the use of e-learning in the educational context. These topics, which have gained prominence over the past decade, highlight the importance of adapting education to contemporary technological demands by integrating digital tools for both teachers and students.

With regard to digital competencies, it was observed that they have become a cornerstone of education systems worldwide. The inclusion of these competencies in the curriculum aims to prepare students for a digitalized world, enabling them to use ICT safely and critically. Furthermore, studies such as those by Fernández (2016) and Rozo García (2016) indicated that, although technology is increasingly present in classrooms, challenges persist regarding methodological implementation and the effective development of skills among students, who often remain in the early stages of acquiring these abilities. This approach highlights the need for pedagogical strategies that address the identified gaps, such as limited proficiency in the use of specific tools like QR codes or social *software* (Vázquez-Cano et al., 2017).

In Mexico, research such as that by Guzmán Games and Velázquez (2020) reveals that, although there is an initial adoption of digital knowledge in some communities, the lack of infrastructure and technological literacy limits the full development of digital skills. Likewise, studies such as those by Carrasco Lozano et al. (2015) and Sánchez-Macías and Veytia-Bucheli (2018) emphasized the need for a deeper integration of these competencies at the graduate level, to ensure that master's and doctoral students have access not only to technology but also to the skills necessary for its effective use.

VLEs are identified as innovative spaces that integrate both technological and pedagogical dimensions, enabling active interaction between teachers and students (Salinas, 2011). These environments have proven effective in improving motivation and learning outcomes, as evidenced by the international studies conducted by Rodríguez Gallego and López Martínez (2013) at the University of Seville, where the use of a VLE fostered collaboration and meaningful learning among students. At the national level, Edel-Navarro (2010) and Ayil Carrillo (2018) highlighted the need to develop and study VLEs in Mexico and Latin America, given their potential to transform higher education through interactive platforms such as Moodle, which allow for active student engagement and foster meaningful learning.

In conclusion, this review of the current state of the art highlights the importance of digital competencies and e-learning platforms as key tools for addressing the challenges of education in the digital age. The studies reviewed demonstrate significant progress in the digital self-perception and skills of students and teachers, although they also identify limitations and gaps that must be addressed through innovative educational strategies. The integration of digital competencies and the use of EVAs not only facilitate learning but also promote the development of skills necessary for effective participation in a digital society. Thus, it is imperative that educational institutions continue to adapt their methodologies to ensure a comprehensive education aligned with current technological demands, guaranteeing that all students acquire solid digital skills applicable in multiple contexts..

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