

Good morning. Thank you very much for the invitation and for organising this insightful event. I am honoured to be connected with all of you and to have the opportunity to share the stage with such bright minds. As an interdisciplinary researcher and lecturer, I have always been proud of my Moroccan roots. The circle feels round as I am standing here at Ibn Tofail University, where my parents studied 20 years ago.

So, why am I here today? My area of expertise lies in the Responsible use of Artificial Intelligence (AI), ensuring that these technologies are developed and deployed ethically, respecting human rights and promoting positive societal impacts. I conduct research, provide guidance, and share expertise to help organisations navigate the complex landscape of AI and foster its responsible implementation.

Today, I want to address a problem that we often encounter—a phenomenon called “problem blindness.” In the realm of technology, especially with the hype surrounding AI, we tend to focus too much on solutions without fully understanding the underlying problems. Often, by following the so-called “engineering perspective,” engineers deploy solutions simply because they are available or can be done without considering whether they **should** be done.

Addressing the topic of the Metaverse in Education requires taking a step back and examining the broader issue of education itself in the Moroccan context. While Morocco has made progress in overcoming high illiteracy rates¹, many barriers still need to be addressed. One such barrier is digital illiteracy, which stems from the inability or lack of skills to navigate and utilise digital technologies effectively. Therefore, addressing illiteracy becomes crucial in bridging the gap of digital illiteracy, enabling everyone to participate fully in the digital age.

Furthermore, it is essential to remember that technology should be the means, not the end goal. We must be cautious of “techno-solutionism,” which attempts to solve societal or socio-political problems solely through technical solutions.² This is a concerning trend, as it can lead to the obsession with becoming the “next tech unicorn” without considering the broader implications or the outright denouncement of technology and its applications. We need to prioritise the empowerment of individuals, with humans being the most crucial factor in the

¹ <https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/MAR/morocco/literacy-rate#:~:text=Adult%20literacy%20rate%20is%20the,a%202.18%25%20increase%20from%202018.>

² <https://en.unesco.org/futuresofeducation/ideas-lab/morozov-avoid-solutionism-digital-transformation>

equation. People should never be forgotten, and the effects on individuals should be carefully considered when developing technological solutions.

One example I often cite is Estonia, which has taken a fantastic approach to digitalisation by prioritising accessibility and inclusivity³. The country has focused on digital skills education, starting from an early age and integrating it into the national curriculum. Students not only apprehend digital skills, coding, and hands-on experience with computers; but also learn about digital citizenship, internet safety, responsible online behaviour, coding, and hands-on experience with computers. Furthermore, they have emphasised the early integration of continuous lifelong learning, as well as creating partnerships and collaborations with various stakeholders to enhance digital skills education and combat digital illiteracy.

Thus, the golden question we must ask ourselves is this: Are we willing to invest millions in digitising our classrooms into a “Metavirsity,” or should we first focus on combating digital illiteracy? It is crucial to ensure that every student has connectivity and access to laptops and the knowledge to use them. We should not skip these essential steps. It is worth noting that, for example, South Korea, known for its high level of digital literacy, invests \$800,000 annually to offer courses in the Metaverse.⁴ However, we must remember that there is no one-size-fits-all approach, and we should, therefore, strive to design from the margins⁵, by considering our context’s specific needs and challenges.

In conclusion, let us avoid this “problem blindness” and prioritise a comprehensive understanding of our challenges. Technology should be a tool to empower individuals, but we should never lose sight of the people and the effect it will have on them. Investing in combatting digital illiteracy and ensuring equitable access to technology can create a solid foundation for the responsible implementation of innovative solutions like the Metaverse. Let us work together to bridge the (digital) gaps, promote inclusivity, and empower everyone to thrive in this digital era.

³ <https://e-estonia.com/estonia-a-european-and-global-leader-in-the-digitalisation-of-public-services/>

⁴ <https://mixed-news.com/en/how-japan-and-south-korea-rely-on-the-metaverse-for-education/>

⁵ <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/design-margins>