Changing Technology = Empowering Students through Media Literacy Education

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Abstract

Background: As the world is changing quickly due to the technological advances, educators are looking at ways in which to empower their students' learning with digital platforms. Media literacy education is key for how this can happen in the 21st century classroom which seeks to promote learning without censoring the learner. Considering how media literacy can help educate students to become critical thinkers and how educators can contribute to developing digital citizens who are competent and proficient needs to be a part of the discourse. This article seeks to contribute to the case for media literacy education at a time when digital technologies are overflowing in schools, homes, and globally as means for empowering the digital students.

Goals: The purpose of this article is to review where social networking and other Web 2.0 programs has taken today's students in the personal and academic lives. It examines how empowering the student learner through media literacy education is vital to the continued success of the learner in the 21st century.

Research Method: This exploratory study of the digital environments and media literacy uses observations, teacher interviews, and conferences with peers, educators, and researchers as method.

Results: Findings demonstrate a lack of focus and confusion in the area of media literacy education and digital technologies for teachers, but these are acknowledged as needed and important in the growth of students.

Keywords: media literacy, empowerment, digital literacy

科技變遷──透過媒體素養教育賦予學生更高能力

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摘要

*研究背景：*隨著科技發展，世界變遷的速度越來越快，教育工作者正研究如何可以讓學生在數位平台上學習。21世紀教室鼓勵學習的方式是不為學生過濾資料，因此要達到在數位平台上學習的目的，媒體素養教育成了關鍵。該如何透過媒體素養幫助學生成為具批判思考能力者，以及教育工作者如何培育具精熟程度的數位市民，應是討論的議題之一。在此數位科技充斥於學校、家庭和整個世界的時代下，本文希望在推動媒體素養教育方面有所貢獻。

*研究目的：*本文旨在回顧社會網路和其他Web 2.0程式對現今學生的個人與學術生活會有什麼影響。本文將檢視藉由媒體素養教育賦予學生更高能力，對他們在21世紀能持續成功的重要性。

*研究方法：*本研究是關於數位環境與媒體素養的探索性研究，並運用觀察法、教師面談，以及與同儕、教育工作者和研究者進行會議討論等方法進行。

*研究結果：*結果顯示教師對於媒體素養教育與數位科技的知識，缺乏焦點且有些混亂，而這些要素對於學生的成長相當重要。

關鍵字：媒體素養、增權益能（empowerment）、數位素養

"Media education provides the critical knowledge and the analytical tools that empower media audiences to function as autonomous and rational citizens, enabling them to make informed use of the media... [M]edia literacy is one of the principal new tools that provide citizens with the skills they need to make sense of the sometimes overwhelming flow of daily media and in particular, new media and information disseminated through new communication technologies. These forces are reshaping traditional values while transforming them into contemporary new ways of understanding life, society, and culture."

Thomas Tufte (ed.) and Florencia Enghel, ed. *The International Clearinghouse on Children, Youth and Media's Yearbook 2009,* November 2009.

We live in a global society-that fact has never been truer than it is today. With the onset of the newest technologies available to us through mobile applications and social networking sites, both of which has expanded and multiplied, the need for empowering students through education-specifically media literacy education is of vital importance. In the past decade, technology has managed to leap our society forward-marked primarily by the exponential growth of Twitter and Facebook. Whether it is because the terminology is more familiar or the tools themselves are more readily in use through Web 2.0 programs, it appears that more and more people are available via these online platforms.

Technology's pace is quicker. For students, (for the purpose of this article students will be defined as those in the middle years-10 to15 years of age and primarily in the United States), this has been a boon of opportunity where texting and chatting and creating online have surpassed other media more than in any other generation. However, access to information does not necessary mean literate of information. Media literacy education provides students with the opportunity to critically consider the information that they are receiving, and recognize the differences between a truth vs. a fallacy. In fact, media literacy education is the only way in which schools can provide a working knowledge of the construction of language, ideas, and media. This article seeks to provide an analysis of the importance of media literacy education as a method of empowerment integrated within the context of the various digital environments.

Protectionists or ?

The field of media literacy is divided by protectionists vs. those who seek to empower our students. The protectionist seeks to inoculate students from the world of media. The teacher becomes the provider of the information or the 'vessel of truth' which will in turn create a gatekeeping mentality. Many protectionist educators believe that they are doing the job of the parent in instructing where the media seems to have interjected. Participating in this form of education, however, tends to alienate the students from actually critically discussing the many ideas presented by the various media environments.

"Schools are places where students can learn to transform society. In a classroom that embraces a pedagogy of critical media literacy, space is made for student to analyze and critique dominant narratives" (Gainer, 2010, 368). Those who want to empower students realize that learning and teaching about media is about delving into that transformation and further engaging the pleasure principle which determines how and what we select to watch and

participate within the media. Those educators who carry this role are not interested in telling students that what they watch is wrong or inappropriate, but understanding why these choices are made by young adults. The broadness of their choices provides the educator with the opportunity to learn from his or her pupil.

Students of this generation are motivated to look at the tools available differently. Even their exploration through sites such as YouTube can provide the educator with some valuable resources which could be later used with other classes. At the same time, observing and participating in the items that are engaging today's students supplies the educator with insights into the teenage mind as well as likes and dislikes. Of course, in order for this type of sharing to happen there needs to be an open source of communication with mutual respect that will lend itself to this type of dynamic. Open dialogue is empowerment of and for both parties involved in the education process.

> Media functions as a vehicle for the flow of a plurality of viewpoints and multiplicity of voices, thus permitting exercises of citizenship such as participation, criticism and voting. Informed citizens can better and more actively participate in their societies' decision making processes. ... Media literacy empowers the critical understanding of the media as well as the ability to decode, understand, communicate and create media products. Media literacy activates people's engagement and serves as a catalyst for open and well informed dialogue (UNESCO, 2009).

In part, the tension between the protectionist and the empowerer is due to the mediums that are studied such as television, film, music, the internet and more. When the internet became open in schools in the United States, the struggle began with how to teach it or even with it and how to keep it away from our children. Firewalls and other filtering programs became a normal placement and even a requirement by the federal government in order for there to be access points to the internet. When social networking and various Web 2.0 tools were introduced within the internet, an explosion took place that extended beyond even the imaginations of those administrators who worked to filter out any resources that they deemed inappropriate. These mediums were spilling over into the classroom and not just through the computer, but also through the cell phone and other gadgets. The alert level seemed to increasingly grow and the fear surrounding these tools began to clash with the idea that there might be potential for learning.

Most educators and certainly parents take the approach of being protectionists in these socialized environments. Their knowledge of many of these tools is minimal or it is used infrequently in comparison to their students. Or if it is used, then it is looked at as being entertainment and not educational. Their fear borders on paranoia as it diminishes the role of the child as a citizen or as one that has some true semblance of proprietary knowledge of the technology they are using (Byron, 2008). These fears are not just from parents, but also from educators. The fear of what could be found online or what might be discovered causes the teacher, technology coordinator, and school administrator to remove or eliminate, in many cases, anything that they might consider to be detrimental to the health and well-being of the child. But, the question becomes, what is detrimental, who decides, and how is this enforced? At the same time, when do we allow children to

have some privacy in order to grow and what are we teaching them by these actions?

The Opposite of Empowerment-Fear

The fear factor has been undermining the process of progress in using a variety of technology tools in the educational classroom. The fear is of the unknown or what the media projects as potential danger has been hyped up to a greater degree than is actually the case. At a recent conference by the Family Online Safety Institute (FOSI), the discussion on this topic caused quite a flurry. The comment that the danger to students is no longer about predators, but about peers was a bit surprising to the audience of parents, but not so much for educators. The relationships that students are developing online are creations made in low barriers; meaning that the boundaries that exist with true, traditional, real-life friendships are vastly different than the ones created in the online world (Palfrey, J., Grasser, U., and d. boyd, 2010). Comments that would never be made publicly are freely done through a computer screen. There is a vortex encapsulated through the transfer of data which is taking place from computer to computer. On each end of that spectrum are teens primarily who are pushing the boundaries without a context of proprietary roles. In fact, the alienation of adults in this online world has in some respects propelled the teen user to surface without questioning or discerning the appropriateness of their interactions or relationships as discussed in the report "Living and Learning with New Media: Summary of Finds from the Digital Youth Project" sponsored by the MacArthur Foundation.

> Youth using new media often learn from their peers, not teachers or adults, and notions of expertise and authority have been turned on their heads. Such learning differs fundamentally form traditional instruction and is often framed negatively by adults as a means of 'peer pressure. Yet adults can still have tremendous influence in setting 'learning goals (Ito, M., Horst, H., Bitttani, M., boyd, d., Herr-Stephensons, B., Lange, P., Pascoe, C.J., and L. Robinson, November 2008, np).

Through media literacy education, as its approach to learning is through critically thinking and evaluating the messages, there is a vehicle for considering the delivered messages and the constructs of each medium. As technology progresses, the hours of use by children and teens has also increased (Rideout, Foehr, and Roberts, 2010). However the increase of instructional time related to these tools has not and in fact has been non-existent in many places. That instructional time extends even to parents or guardians who are unfamiliar with the tools or toys their children are using despite the fact that they were the purchasers of these items.

The disconnect in educational circles has widened and created some additional problems with educating our students. Many educators are dealing with disciplinary actions vs. aggregating the information that students are receiving or interacting with as useful to the classroom environment. Schools in the United States and in other countries have taken the approach of shutting down whole websites or banning many of the social networking tools (Byron, 2008). Cell phones are banned, students who are caught on some of the social networking sites are disciplined, iPods and mp3 players are restricted, and the list goes on and on. There are even schools which ban flash-drives because of the fear that students might bring in a virus which could possibly bring down the whole school network. Teachers become in

essence the enemy to students when it comes to the newest technologies. That role tends to push students away and creates headaches for the student learner and the teacher who seeks to provide resources which are now locked by system administrators. This approach to the new media technology borders on practicing censorship.

Media Literacy vs. Censorship

The technology of today whether it is the Web 2.0 tools, the social networking sites, or the newest device, provides school a unique opportunity to foster an understanding of the power of the information world and the Internet through media literacy education. Media literacy education is in fact the direct opposite of censorship. Censorship reinforces the fear, confusion, and uncertainty many teachers worry about when media related topics come about in the classroom. It is much easier for one to ignore the digital world than to participate or interact with it within the context of the classroom setting. Media literacy is in fact empowerment of the best kind by teaching students to thoughtfully question and consider the choices they make as they participate in various media.

Media literacy education instead delves right into some of the toughest topics while bridging discussions which can at times be controversial. The platforms represented by the Web 2.0 technologies allows students to create and produce ideas, topics, and subjects which can later be presented in the classroom allowing for some directed conversation to take place; topics which many students have questions for, but are afraid to even ask their parents the answers. As a directed study, media literacy education is an open doorway for communication between the student and the educator. The important

result here is that we have educators who are willing to dig into those topics with confidence. More importantly, if the teachers are unable to answer the questions posed then it is equally important to direct students to materials and resources which can assist them in achieving the answer they require.

"Youths' participation in this networked world suggests new ways of thinking about the role of education. What would it mean to really exploit the potential of the learning opportunities available through online resources and networks?" (Ito, M. et al., November 2008). Protecting the student from the digital world is not a realistic goal. Censorship is at times driven by that motive. Yet, the digital world is available to them inside their homes, via their cell phones, through the video games they play either in the privacy of their bedrooms or when meeting up with friends in their homes. One does not need to look further than the library to know that open source technology is available everywhere. Monitoring of this technology is not always reasonable. In fact, neither school filtering systems nor home monitoring systems can guarantee the protection of children from the items they see online. It is the most benign term that will trigger a flood of inappropriate material. The lesson then becomes how do we teach children to navigate around such negative information and how to appropriately handle the positive and negative nature of the World Wide Web. After all, in most homes and schools, throwing away the computer with all its technology is not a viable option or one that any educator would or should support.

Change Needed

Researchers are advocating for educators to become involved in the social sites with the idea of having an open relationship with students on these

platforms. The only way to empower the student is to also feel empowered as an educator. In order for that to happen, it requires some dedication and openness on the part of the teacher, administrator, and even parent. The idea is that these platforms present where many teens and young adults spend a majority of their time. It begs the questions, what is it about these sites which captivates them and how can we use them in our classrooms to benefit learning? There is no doubt that the interactive features of many of these sites become the gravitational pull for students. Both the Pew Internet Center and the Kaiser Family Foundation have supported this idea as the number of students who use the internet for the purpose of socializing has increased significantly. Some of the data that they collected is as follows:

"Over the past five years, there has been a huge increase in media use among young people." *(Rideout, Foehr, and Roberts, 2010).*

The change that those researchers were able to show was that the hours of use had increased from six to over eight hours a day. The obvious reason was the different forms of media available. More relevant to the discussion was the understanding that the media used may actually be turned on or working for over ten hours a day as there are multiple forms of media in use simultaneously by this generation of youth.

"An explosion in mobile and online media has fueled the increase in media use among young people." *(Rideout, Foehr, and Roberts, 2010).*

The use of the mobile phone has been in popular demand in the European countries for much longer than in the United States. However, the change came

with the lower prices of phones as well as text service plans provided by many of the cell phone companies. The ease in which the transfer of the IM language which in part was initiated with AOL's service and other chat program providers grew with each year as many more acronyms were used by teens and their peers. Furthering the explosion was the increase in Web 2.0 programs and the online social networking platforms which attracts youth to their sites.

While the Kaiser Family Foundation were able to show statistical growth of usage, the transformation can also be seen in education circles by a revised Bloom's Taxonomy which considered the impact of technology on this current generation. The change in the formula presented shows an effort to meet and match the evolution of change with students in the 21st century. The biggest modification evident is that terminology which emphasizes the active voice and follows the thinking process fitting well with today's participatory culture (Anderson and Krathwohl, 2001; Churches, 2008).

Fig 1- Bloom's Taxonomy

Creativity

Evaluating

Analyzing

Applying

Understanding

Remembering
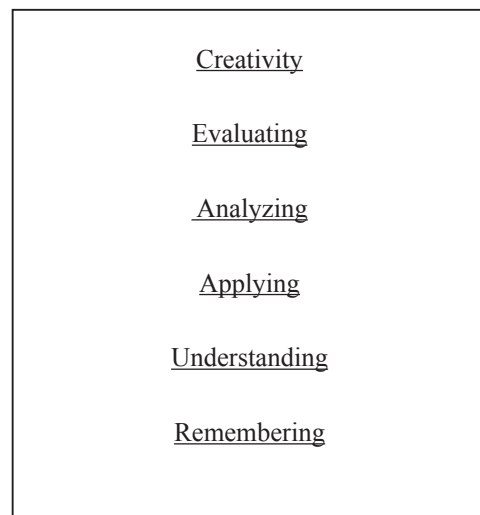
Parallels and Possibilities.

Recently Jonathan Douglas, the director of the National Literacy Trust, told BBC News, "Our research suggests a strong correlation between kids using technology and wider patterns of reading and writing. Engagement with online technology drives their enthusiasm for writing short stories, letters, song lyrics or diaries. Our research results are conclusive - the more forms of communications children use the stronger their core literary skills" (Kleinman, 2009). While many educators are not as certain of the final results of a student's capacity for engaging in the written form through these networks, there is a growing body of research which states that it has great potential. Blogging is much like journaling and whether it is in a book or an online space, the ability to write and present ideas is a part of both.

In each instance where an online format can be used does not in turn denigrate the need for good learning. The opposite is true. The prevalence of each of these tools forces the educator to consider a form for which new technologies would work best with the classroom curriculum while maintaining high academic qualifications. Just because text language is the mode of speak does not necessarily mean that it should be found within a research paper or more formal writing. Yet, it does have a place within the context of a more informal piece; this type of language can be productive. Twitter is a wonderful communications tool, but it does need a directed purpose within the classroom. As part of this discussion there needs to be a conceptualization of what a digital citizen looks like. Topics reinforcing and upholding positive online behaviors will continue to be necessary. The more involved students become with these online environments the more reinforcement they will need because as a participatory culture the importance of their growth is

also based on how they treat others. As was discussed in the most recent Learning and Leading magazine produced by the International Society for Technology Education (ISTE),

> Quality online participation should entail demonstrating respect for self and others in the digital common, including knowing how to adjust privacy settings, download music and other files legally, post messages that are respectful to the online community, and encourage others to practice responsible online behaviors (Greenhow, 2010, 24).

Is this not empowerment of the individual? Indeed, in order for a student to possess these attributes they would need to be able to critically reason and understand who they are in the online world. In practicing responsible behavior they would be recognizing that the opposite exists and could be detrimental to themselves as individuals. Demonstrating this capability would then show the ability to actively participate in the new Bloom's Taxonomy.

On the opposing side would be those who question whether allowing students to be online would actually compromise themselves. Many articles of late ask the question how much information is too much information? The answer to that question, still needs to be determined, yet in a world where we live by barcodes, online services, and other modalities of technology this point may become mute. As the technology sphere will then be about, do you participate in these platforms or do you chose to not to do so? Empowering the student would allow them to also be able to answer these questions for themselves in order to make the best choices. In the end, as an educator, the point is that these technological tools serve as extensions of important

classroom notes or thoughts. These backchannels for conversations that are taking place serve as a valid case for new learning possibilities in the classroom and the reinforcement of empowerment through media literacy education.

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