Teaching Digital Citizenship in the Networked Classroom

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ABSTRACT

This article uses the results of a 2016 survey of Canadian teachers to provide a snapshot of the extent to which the survey participants have been able to successfully incorporate digital literacy into their daily teaching. The data suggests that governments continue to prioritize technical access elements over more participatory elements of digital literacy, making it difficult to go beyond basic literacy requirements. In addition, there are a number of barriers that make it more difficult for teachers to cultivate digital citizenship. These barriers include: the dissolving boundary between in-school and out-of-school contexts; the commercial nature of the digital world; and the continuing difficulty of evaluating online information. This article concludes by arguing that the concept of digital literacy should be broadened beyond the skills-based approach and instead should be solidly organized with the goal of promoting and preparing students for democratic citizenship.

KEYWORDS
Digital Citizenship, Digital Learning, Digital Literacy, Education, Networked Classroom

INTRODUCTION

As networked technologies rolled out in schools throughout the developed world, government departments, school boards and teachers alike actively sought to educate “digital citizens” who critically engage with digital content and participate responsibly in the online public sphere (Ribble, 2015; MediaSmarts, n.d.). The commitment of governments, the ubiquity of networked technology in the classroom, and teachers’ engagement with digital literacy curriculum in countries like Canada make education a key site of inquiry for scholars interested in exploring the ways in which networked technologies impact our understanding of citizenship. It is also an important window into the kinds of skills that young people are encouraged to acquire in order to prepare them to take up the tasks of citizenship as adults.

As Ribble (2015) notes, ethical concerns about the use of technology did not begin with the introduction of the computer, and we have a long history of teaching children to critically assess the social and political impact of various kinds of technological practices. However, during the 2000s, concerns about inappropriate use of computers in schools and online conflict between students created the impetus for introducing curricula specifically focused on inculcating “the norms of appropriate, responsible behaviour with regard to technology use” (15). Particularly as the Internet became an
important site for political action and debate, a consensus emerged around the importance of teaching children “digital citizenship”, broadly defined as that bundle of skills and competencies that will enable them to participate fully in society online (Mossberger et al., 2008).

This paper uses the results of a survey conducted in 2016 to provide a snapshot of Canadian teachers’ perceptions of the democratic citizenship roots of digital literacy and how these might be incorporated into the classroom more effectively.

We start the paper by providing an overview of the literature on digital literacy and digital citizenship. We then explore the extent to which our survey participants have been able to successfully incorporate digital literacy into their daily teaching. Our data suggests that governments continue to prioritize access over more participatory elements of digital literacy. In addition, there are a number of barriers that make it more difficult for teachers to go beyond digital literacy to cultivate digital citizenship. These barriers include: the dissolving boundary between in-school and out-of-school contexts; the commercial nature of the digital world; and the continuing difficulty of evaluating online information. We conclude by arguing that the concept of digital literacy should be broadened beyond the skills-based approach and instead should be solidly organized with the goal of promoting and preparing students for democratic citizenship.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In general the concept of digital literacy combines both technical skills, emphasizing access to and use of computers and other devices, and cognitive and social skills, emphasizing comprehension and evaluation of digital information and processes (Ribble, 2015). The early thinking about digital literacy emphasized the more technical skills and digital literacy was often represented as a pyramid with access and use forming the base of the pyramid, as seen in Figure 1 (MediaSmarts, n.d.).

Familiarizing students with the basics of how to use a computer became a topic for educators in the early 1980s as soon as computers started to replace typewriters. To use computers effectively students first needed access to them, most often in shared computer labs that often were supported by national government funds with the goal of lessening the possibility of a “digital divide”. This early focus on access and use continued to be important as teachers and researchers recognized the range of learning opportunities and resources made available first by computers and then by the Internet. Bawden (2008) discusses the range of terms used to convey merging traditional literacy with the use of computers, including “computer literacy,” “information literacy,” “e-literacy,” “informacy,” “mediacy,” and “network literacy.” The terms “digital literacy” (Gilster 1997) or “media literacy” (Livingstone 2004) emerged as more appropriate labels as both moved more explicitly away from mere technical skills to include cognitive and social skills.

Although some scholars and educators may emphasize technical and access skills over cognitive and social skills, most digital literacy models rather quickly recognized the synergy between the two, reflecting the thinking of Gilster (1997) who viewed “digital literacy [as] about mastering ideas, not keystrokes.”

Gilster suggested that there were four core competencies of digital literacy: Internet searching; hyper-text navigation; knowledge assembly; and content evaluation. Similarly, Livingstone (2004) identified four components of a skills-based approach to media literacy: access; analysis; evaluation; and content creation. She argued that, although each was a necessary component of media literacy, together they did not convey the literacy necessary in the complex and changing media environment that students encountered. She advocated for a move beyond the traditional skills-based approach to recognize the “historical and cultural contingency of both media and the social knowledge processes that interpret them…” This requires a “more critical take on literacy” that incorporates questions of the roles of institutions, including the state, that manage power and affect who will benefit in a technologically mediated environment.
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