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Digital Literacy

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Abstract

Digital literacy is a significant component of youth, information and access. Here, the author examines three core issues surrounding youth digital literacy: issues of access, knowledge, and ethical use, and argues that by being aware of youths' needs, particularly those in under-served populations, librarians can make informed decisions about their sometimes conflicting roles as both advocates for and protectors of youth.

The Digital Dilemma:

Empowering and Protecting as Youth Librarians

Digital literacy, defined by the American Library Association as "the ability to use information and communication technologies to find, evaluate, create, and communicate information" (Visser), requires access to digital media, technical and cognitive knowledge, and ethical practice habits (Jenkins, 2006). Using this criteria, many young people today are digitally *illiterate*, and unfortunately, being a digitally illiterate youth can have serious consequences. Poor school performance, manipulation due to misinformation, even emotional and physical abuse can all stem from digital illiteracy.

A recent story on NPR sparked controversy over whose job it is to teach digital literacy skills. Some commenters claimed it is unrealistic to expect overburdened teachers to add one more responsibility to their plates; others

wondered if "digital citizenship" isn't just common sense or inherent decency and argued that it can't really be taught at all (Solomon, 2010). Renee Hobbs (2011), a leading authority on digital and literacy media, however, argues, "much of the best work in digital and media literacy occurs as a result of productive collaboration between classroom teachers, technology specialists, and library/media professionals" (p. 174).

As part of this professional literacy-building team, youth librarians must be aware of issues surrounding digital literacy and position themselves to respond effectively. Francis McDonald (1988) proposes how we see these issues depends upon how we view youth themselves. Some educators view youth as potential "victims" of media (Jenkins, 2006), and seek to protect them from information, ideas, and people that pose harm. Others criticize this view of youth as "imperialistic" (Nodelman, 1992) and want, instead, to be advocates for youth. They work to remove barriers from information, promote access, and empower youth to explore new ideas. Though the ALA rightly takes an advocate position on many issues surrounding digital literacy, I argue as youth librarians, we must also consider our responsibility to protect our most vulnerable patrons.

Access Issues

At the most basic level, being "digitally literate" requires having access to the latest digital media. The word media, a plural form of medium, originated in the 1920s and was once used to describe newspapers, radio, and TV. Today, media can refer to print, visual, sound, or digital formats (Hobbs, 2011, p. 9). At the moment, the most common digital media include blogs, wikis, Twitter, social networking

sites, and digital storytelling (Beach, Campano, Edmiston & Borgman, 2012). Many youth are using these digital media from the minute they get up in the morning until they go to bed at night—and beyond. Hobbs (2011) reports that a typical teen logs an average of 200 hours of media and technology use each month.

Though some adults ignore or trivialize the digital media with which youth are engaged, Hobbs argues educators can't afford to do so; "In order to reach today's learners, educators need to be responsive to students' experiences with their culture—which is what they experience through television, movies, YouTube, the Internet, Facebook, music, and gaming" (p. 7). Librarians should, for this reason, embrace digital media and incorporate it into youth programming. The Winter 2011 issue of *Young Adult Library Services* (*YALS*), a journal of the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA), offers ideas for engaging technology projects such as using digital photography, making laptop cases, and creating short films; libraries are choosing to buy more e-books and audio books (Rubin, 2010); and YALSA frequently suggests that libraries advertise their youth programming through social media sites like Facebook and Twitter.

However, we must remember not all teens can get online to find out about this programming, and certainly not all teens own e-readers, digital cameras, or laptops. The most recent Pew Foundation data shows while the majority (93%) of teens ages 12-17 in the United States have regular access to the Internet, 7% do not. This gap in technology access is known as the "digital divide." This divide is due, in part, to economic disparities, and it affects youth of color and youth with disabilities more frequently (Rubin, 2010; Pew Foundation, 2012). The access gap is slowly

closing, but in the mean time, we must protect youth without access from being ignored, undervalued, and losing even more cultural capital.

Knowledge Issues

According to Howard Besser, the digital divide is not solely about access issues. Besser contends there is “a whole range of other digital disparity gaps, including: effective use of information, the ability for an information user to be more than a passive consumer, and the availability of relevant, useful, appropriate, and affordable content.” Most of our users, considered “digital natives,” have strong technical skills and are “savvy in utilizing various digital literacies” (Blummer, 2008). For instance, Buffin and North (2007) examined the digital literacy practices among 15-16 year olds in Melbourne, Australia and found students frequently and easily “circumventing blocked websites, sneaking games into computer hard drives, and utilizing cell phones and iPods within the school environment.”

The aspect of digital literacy that does not seem as developed in these natives is cognitive skill. A study by Eshet-Alkali and Amichai-Hamburger (2004) revealed though high school students showed advanced skills in photo-visual literacy, they had a poor performance on task measuring information literacy. According to the authors, “the students’ lack of information literacy skills illustrated their ‘weakness as educated consumers of information’ and potential for being ‘easily manipulated’” (Blummer, 2008, p. 426).

How do we get students to critically examine the multitude of inaccurate information on the Web? The ALA “affirms that school library media centers have a unique role in promoting critical thinking and problem solving” (Rubin, 2012, p.

395). A document released by the United States Department of Education, “National Education Technology Plan 2010: Learning Powered by Technology,” urges teacher-librarians to adopt a “learning commons model” which moves away from traditional classroom/library instruction into what they call “super learning experiences” by putting “students at the center and empower[ing] them to take control of their own learning.” The Department of Education believes these knowledge building centers, comprising online learning communities, “24/7” access, and “a giant conversation” will promote an open system of instructional computing (Loertscher, 2011).

Henry Jenkins (2006), however, questions these “defenders of the new digital cultures [who act] as though youth can simply acquire these skills on their own” (p. 12). Others agree and argue direct instruction is more effective in teaching information literacy to some youth. Lisa Delpit (1988), for instance, claims though student-centered techniques like these may be effective with students within what she calls the “culture of power,” students outside of it may feel cheated by them. Black students, for instance, who, Delpit says, "expect an authority figure to act with authority," and may feel the teacher is shirking her responsibilities if she is not offering direct instruction to the class, tend to be much more successful in teacher-led situations.

Ethical Issues

The final, and perhaps most concerning, requirement for digital literacy is the ability to use digital media responsibly and ethically. According to Hobbs, “Adolescents are developmentally focused on taking risks, pursuing experience for the sake of experience, and seeking out novelty, complexity and intense

situations…That's how they learn the skills they need to become independent adults" (Hobbs, 2011, p. 128). The ALA urges librarians to provide youth with unrestricted access to the Internet and believes "prohibiting children and young adults from using social networking sites does not teach safe behavior and leaves youth without the necessary knowledge and skills to protect their privacy or engage in responsible free speech" (Flowers, 2011, p. 104). Rubin (2010) agrees, "Although young people's involvement in social networking raises legitimate privacy concerns, emphasis should be placed on teaching them about responsible conduct rather than on restricting access to those networks" (p. 395). He emphasizes, "Parents, not the library, should be responsible for regulating the Internet use of their children" (p. 396).

Yet, the statistics are disconcerting. "One out of three teens has seen violent or hateful content online," and "more than 90% of American kids ages 8 to 15 have seen online porn" (Hobbs, 2011, p. 128). In fact, the porn industry seeks out children by buying domain names of misspelled URLS, a practice called "typo-squatting," and has linked porn sites to at least 26 cartoon characters' names. (Hobbs, 2011, p. 128). Youth, with their still-developing cerebral cortexes and decision-making skills, may not be able to process this online content in a healthy way. Unfortunately, parents, for a variety of reasons, are not stepping in. "Research shows that 80% of teens have little or no interaction with parents or adults about their use of media and technology" (Hobbs, 2011, p. 8). Even YALSA president Kim Patton (2011) admits, "It is simply undeniable that teens are faced with choices that have consequences that they don't have the skills, aptitudes, or experiences to

evaluate and that the stakes are too high for them to be left to their own devices in figuring it all out" (p. 3). The stakes are indeed high. Acts of plagiarism, inappropriate online sharing, cyber-bullying, and predatorial grooming can result in a range of legal, emotional, and physical consequences for both perpetrators and victims; one particularly devastating example is the case of the Rutgers student who was spied on via his roommate's webcam and subsequently committed suicide.

Empowering and Protecting

Youth librarians should be using and promoting new technologies, encouraging our patrons to play around with digital media, and allowing uncensored use. At the same time, however, we must remain protective of youth who can't afford to access these digital tools, youth who may need our direct instruction, and youth who do not have parents able or willing to monitor their use of technology. Doing so without compromising advocacy for the rest of our youth is a challenge we will continually face. In most cases, though, simply teaching the controversy is a useful first step.

> In addition to celebrating the most exciting ways that digital media support and enhance learning, we have to engage students in frank and authentic conversations about the problematic and challenging kinds of experiences they have online as they create and share messages (Hobbs, 2011, p. 126).

Once the conversation has begun, relationships will be built, and youth librarians can then determine when to step in and set appropriate boundaries and when to step away and set youth free to take some risks, so that all of our youth can acquire

the competencies of digital literacy and become knowledgeable, critical, and ethical users of the information tools available to them today.

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