LESSONS
IN LEARNING

Media literacy for children
in the internet age

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In 1952, when British academic Alexander Douglas created the first computer game—a version of tic-tac-toe he called *Noughts and Crosses*—he unknowingly opened a pinhole into a vast new world. Twenty-one years after the fact, that hole became a floodgate when a group of researchers from the U.S. Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) developed a method to communicate across computer networks, effectively launching the internet in the process. Neither Douglas or DARPA could predict what the internet would eventually become: a nearly infinite realm of instant communication, unlimited information and hyper-reality.

Today, children are born into a wired world where they are as likely to pick up a computer mouse as they are a book. Statistics Canada reports that 81% of homes with children under 18 years old are connected to the internet, and the number grows with each passing year.[1]

While new media stimulates creativity and promotes learning, it can also expose children to danger (in the form of inappropriate sexual content and online bullying). For both parents and children, media literacy is an important tool in the understanding of new media and for ensuring that children's exposure to the digital world is enjoyable and safe.

New media (also known as digital media and interactive media) is a term used to describe forms of knowledge, communication and art that are enabled by digital technology. New media environments are generally interactive in nature.

Media literacy is generally understood as the ability to read, analyze, evaluate and create media in a variety of forms.[2] It encompasses a series of skills that are increasingly in demand: the ability to think critically, act strategically, multi-task, collaborate and broaden knowledge.[3] Children can develop these skills through their extensive use of new media, but they do not develop spontaneously from simple interaction with new media; hands-on instruction and guidance by parents and/or teachers plays an important role.

Children's use of new media

In 2004, Canadian children aged six to 11 spent an average of two hours per day in front of a screen of some kind (including computers, video games and televisions), while adolescent children between the ages of 12 and 17 logged an average of nearly three hours per day.[4]

In the U.S., the average college graduate will have spent 10,000 hours spent playing video games and 20,000 hours watching television—compared to less than 5,000 hours reading.[5] While these statistics may be alarming to some, they indicate the pervasive nature of new media in the lives of young people today.

The manner in which young people use new media varies in terms of both environmental and geographic access. In a 2005 study of more than 5,200 children in Grades 4 to 11 across Canada, 37% indicated that they had their own computer with internet access, 23% said they had their own cell phone and 22% said they had their own webcam.[6] The students who had their own computer reported

spending twice as much time online as those students who shared a computer with other family members.[7] While youth are the fastest growing demographic of internet users in Canada, those living in rural or low-income households are less likely to have computers with internet access in their homes.[8]

Research shows that children and adolescents participate in a wide range of activities on the computer; for example the internet has become the preferred information source for homework.[9] In addition to school-related activities, children and youth are using the internet for a number of reasons including e-mail, instant messaging, multiplayer online games, video and music downloading and blogging.[10]

While the social and informational benefits of new media are readily apparent, the online environment also exposes children to content that can be harmful or is of questionable merit. For example, young people often encounter sexual or hate-based content while surfing the internet. In Canada, 53% of school-age children report they have received pornographic e-mails while 22% said they had received pornographic materials from somebody they had met online.[11]

While encounters with pornography have become a common occurrence for many younger internet users, studies show that these experiences may not pose a serious threat. Many young people stumble upon online pornography when searching for something else, and will close it down as soon as they realize their mistake.[12] A recent study conducted among 1,500 British children between the ages of nine and 19 found that of those who encountered online pornography more than half (54%) did not give it much thought, while 20% were disgusted by it and less than 10% expressed an interest in it.[13]

According to some experts, the challenge for adults centres on how to protect their children from premature exposure to pornography and "how to help youth think through their initial encounters with sexually explicit material."[14]

Another danger new media poses for young people is online bullying. A small but significant number of school-age children in Canada have been exposed to bullying or hate on the internet: 14% of young internet users report having been threatened while using instant messaging, while 16% say they have posted hate-based comments online about another person or a group of people.[15]

While encounters with pornography and objectionable online content are increasingly common for young of new media, children's general lack of media literacy skills leave them vulnerable to an even more pervasive threat; misinformation and breaches of privacy.

While many children easily master the skills that allow them to interact with and create their own new media content, most have only mastered some aspects of the new media environment. Only a small percentage of children report that they: read the privacy statements of web communities they join (or online contests they might enter); know what web cookies are or how their online activities can be tracked; know how to conduct an effective search; or know how to determine if information is unbiased.[16]

Lessons in learning

In today's media environment, children have become producers as well as consumers of content. As of Sept. 7, 2007, four of the top 10 most-visited websites in Canada hosted user-produced content.

Facebook ranked first, YouTube was sixth, Wikipedia was eighth, and MySpace was ninth.[17] By producing content children are exposed to a rich opportunity to develop their media literacy skills. On a daily basis, young people access and examine content and create and evaluate their own content based on comparisons with the work of others. In doing so, young media content producers have the chance to gain a greater awareness of the potential for misrepresentation and bias in the media content they access.[18] It is up to parents to help the children in their lives capitalize on and learn from these opportunities.

Parents and educators play an important role in helping children become more media literate. However, for many adults the internet remains an unfamiliar and sometimes confusing place.[19] While many adults believe they are sufficiently able to direct, monitor and teach children about the internet the majority of children say that they have learned more from their peers or on their own, and are largely unsupervised when surfing the web.[20] Thus, developing strong media literacy skills should be an important goal for Canadians of all ages. Following are some tips for parents looking to support their children as they wade into the new media age.

Lead by example

Perhaps the most important thing parents can do to influence their children's use of digital media is to examine their own media use and behave in a way they feel comfortable with their children emulating. Because parental models of behaviour have a strong influence on children's behaviour, parents should be aware of their own patterns and modify them where necessary. But examining their own patterns of media use is not sufficient: parents should also take a close look at the media-related behaviour patterns of other people caring for their children, such as grandparents and babysitters.

Supervise media usage of young, impressionable children

Increasingly, it is the case that children have direct and unsupervised access to digital technologies, allowing them to use these technologies without the benefit of parental scrutiny and guidance. One of the most important things a parent can do is supervise and engage with their young children as they begin to use digital media. In this way parents can shield children from content that is inappropriate, explain material that their children may not fully understand and challenge ideas and practices that conflict with their family's values.

Talk with your children about their use of digital media

Rating systems and technological "quick fixes" (such as filtering mechanisms on televisions or computer systems) are less effective than a simple discussion

between parents and children concerning new media and its messages. It is during these discussions that parents can provide explanations of the values they hold. Ultimately, it is the plausibility of parents' arguments that will persuade children to do X and avoid Y. And it is these values that will stay with children in their parents' absence.

Limit children's consumption of digital media

Digital media provides enormous opportunities for both learning and entertainment, but a steady diet of such media to the exclusion of active play and social interaction is not healthy. Establishing a balance is a challenge that is easy for busy families to ignore, but in the long run, the time taken to set limits will pay dividends for parents and their children.

Conclusions

Parents can only do so much to guide their children's experiences with new media. Many have argued that media literacy should be taught more deliberately in school, rather than merely as an added topic that is squeezed into an already full curriculum. Others are pushing for a major systematic change to our education system that would allow the qualities of new media—faster, self-guided, more interactive—to form the platform from which all teaching occurs.[21] Policy and education should continue to facilitate greater understanding of commercial content, privacy rights and intellectual property.[22] A pragmatic focus on media literacy needs to occur to help children to better protect themselves from unwanted images and content, and to help educate parents so that they know; how children are using new media, how to help protect them and how to help them make sound judgments in their online experiences.[23]

Canada is generally recognized as a leader in media literacy study and education[24], with the subject being a part of the core curriculum in every province and territory. While the majority of direct instruction focussing on media literacy occurs in higher grades, most provinces and territories have identified media literacy as a component of language arts, visual and dramatic arts, and social studies in all grade levels. Key themes include; the history of media, media products (production, purpose, values, codes, conventions and characteristics), audience interpretation, and media's impact on society. Digital media fit under a larger framework, which includes film and television studies, music, literature and other forms of expression.

Despite guidelines and learning outcome goals set by education ministries, keeping up with rapid changes in online culture and technologies can be both intimidating and daunting, particularly for those teachers who are less familiar with new media. Additional challenges include the need for professional development, resources and up-to-date software and equipment. The role of media literacy is becoming of ever-increasing importance in helping students make sense of the digital environments in which they are currently immersed.

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