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# Social Distancing: Closing the Gap Between Digital and Social Media Literacy Practices and Literacy Instruction

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This semester, I taught an undergraduate course, entitled "Contemporary Literacy," which explored the construct of literacy over time. Emerging from a year of Zoom courses, the students were asked to reflect on their literacy activities in digital spaces through a diary project over the course of one week. These media diaries changed the direction of my course as the students' experiences showed a nuanced consumption of information through digital spaces, particularly through social media platforms as they overwhelmingly reported accessing news through Twitter and Instagram. My students acknowledged being a part of the "digital generation," but pushed against this idea, with one student stating, "in many ways I think I overestimated my own self-awareness and underestimated my naivete as a digital consumer" in response to her acceptance of news she consumed through social media. Another student acknowledged how they "just take the news I skim as fact because they come from what I deem 'reliable' sources/publications. I really am just making a huge assumption and not critically analyzing anything I read." Academic-related media usage was heavy with schools shifting coursework to online settings. A student stated they "needed to be comfortable with so many different types of platforms, communication styles, and skills" for completing school-related tasks.

Being literate in 2022 is seemingly complicated as the definition of literacy has evolved over time to account for ever-expanding modes of communication. Literacy is a "means of identification, understanding, interpretation, creation, and communication in an increasingly digital, text-mediated, information-rich and fast-changing world" (UNESCO, 2018). As my students reported, these texts mainly come through digital spaces, including social media platforms. This is particularly true for adolescents who report near constant social media use (Anderson and Jiang, 2018). As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, teens increased their already overwhelming usage of social media platforms (Drouin et al., 2020). With the increase of text consumption through social media, educators have the crucial task of understanding text production and consumption and bridging these literacy practices into classrooms. Ethically, the implications of bringing these new literacies into the classroom could not be more relevant. As the very public discourse surrounding education seems to fear new literacies and their potential to undermine traditional skills, it is vital to explore the importance and academic merit of the literacies needed to efficiently comprehend online texts. Students need to receive explicit instruction in how to navigate digital technology, and specifically social media platforms, as the landscape of literacy evolves as we emerge from the pandemic.

Social media literacy is difficult to teach explicitly in schools, as the role of the educator is seemingly limited. However, social media literacy builds upon traditional literacy skills and includes digital, media, and critical literacy practices and a nuanced understanding of digital social practices that include empathy and understanding of multiple viewpoints that can be fostered in

classrooms. This is especially important as students come to the classroom with varying experiences with digital technology resulting from a variety of demographic and background factors. I noticed varying levels of literacy, both digital and traditional, among the students in my course and had the unique opportunity to have them discuss their literacy activities through their individual educational experiences, highlighting discrepancies between the way students are taught to practice literacy in digital spaces across the country. Specifically highlighting her prior schooling, this student appreciated the importance of learning digital skills: "I realized that a plethora of the digital and media literacy skills I learned in the classroom in elementary and middle school are skills I naturally call upon on a day-to-day basis." This student also discussed this assignment, reflecting that completion was dependent on access to technology outside of the classroom, which is not feasible for all students in K-12 settings. Thus, educators have an obligation to bring these social media literacy practices into the classroom in authentic and relevant ways to create equitable experiences for all students to learn digital, media, and critical literacy skills that are crucial for success in contemporary society.

**Teaching Digital and Media Literacy**

Most of the literacy activities my students highlighted in digital spaces were academic in nature and were not scaffolded by professors. Digital literacy, which includes the ability to locate, evaluate, and use information online, use various digital tools, and create digital content in various contexts, is an essential part of being literate. This includes the basic understanding of how to turn on different devices and how to open different programs, which varies immensely between individual students. Teachers in K-12 settings have the opportunity to scaffold these activities through lessons that compel students to explore digital technologies in meaningful and reflective ways. In their reflections, my students praised this type of instruction as particularly helpful in university settings. A few commented about their friends who struggled to complete assignments resulting from their lack of practice in digital spaces. These practices ranged from not being able to find appropriate sources, to having difficulty citing sources, and even to understanding the basics of certain programs.

Teachers should incorporate use of digital platforms such as Google Suite and give students practice using word processing software such as Microsoft Word. These programs are collaborative and facilitate authentic learning as the skills needed can be applied to other digital platforms. When digital skills relating to individual programs become more automatic, students spend less time in frustration at technology and can use more energy on the task. There are meaningful and integrative ways to incorporate these programs in the classroom. For example, teachers can set up classrooms through the program of their choice (i.e., Google Classroom) and walk students through accessing them. This does not need to be a detailed plan for the entire course but can simply provide resources and activities. For younger secondary students, having them complete webquests in groups can facilitate this type of learning through practice and collaboration. Giving students steps to follow with specific instructions can help scaffold their learning and support them as they learn to navigate digital spaces independently. For older students, research projects can also support development of digital literacies, requiring students to practice finding and evaluating sources. These skills establish a foundation on which

students can begin to learn the higher-level media and digital literacy skills that underlie navigating social media spaces.

Issues pertaining to social media platforms specifically, such as privacy, sharing content with extended audiences, social interactions through commenting and direct messaging, and profile curation are important to explore within the context of classrooms. Social media theorists suggest that active discussion of these issues in formal and informal settings can contribute to more efficient social media use, including critical analysis of information and management of emotional responses to situations online (Schreurs and Vandenbosch, 2021). As peers are often valuable learning mentors for adolescents, these types of discussion groups may be particularly effective in helping students understand issues pertaining to social media. Valuing students' out-of-school literacies, particularly their literacy practices within social media, can be a powerful learning tool, especially for those students who may not feel represented or included by typical curricula (Krutka and Carpenter, 2016).

In terms of using social media in the classroom, facilitating meaningful use can be a difficult but meaningful experience. Educators can leverage platforms such as Twitter to help students gather perspectives on different issues. Teachers have also found success using social media platforms such as Twitter for review and asynchronous lessons (Krutka and Carpenter, 2016). Similarly, encouraging reflection on individual media use may help students become more self-aware of themselves as digital consumers (Zucker and Damico, 2019). As social media becomes more ubiquitous, automaticity in our use (i.e., mindless scrolling) limits deeper understanding of how we practice literacy in these spaces. My students recorded lengthy times where they did not recognize they were mindlessly scrolling through their apps until after lengthy time periods. During these scrolling periods, users are exposed to hundreds of messages that they may be integrating into their background knowledge without consciously doing so. These messages can have varying impacts on students due to a number of factors. From an equity standpoint, educators need to make students aware of the construction of messages through social media and teach students to use these platforms actively.

Social media platforms are a unique branch of media as social interactions and discussion become texts through commentary, direct messages, and shared posts that need to be analyzed both traditionally (i.e., decoded) and critically for understanding (Livingstone, 2014). In social media interactions and message consumption, teens need to understand concepts of media production that go into the creation of these texts, particularly the understanding that all media is constructed and has a wide range of implications, including political and ideological, and draw upon specific aesthetics and digital features to promote these messages (Aufderheide, 1992). After reading the students' media diaries, I chose to have my students critically analyze a piece of media upon completing study on media literacy. This media analysis project was well-received, with some students going as far as to analyze a specific social media platform through a critical and media literacy lens. As students learned through their study and then in practice, consumers of media negotiate meaning from these messages based on their individual perspectives. Many discussed their experiences with their chosen media from an emotional and individual perspective and chose to analyze these aspects of the piece more critically. As social media users are often shown content without necessarily searching for it, an

understanding of media can help them to analyze this content more efficiently and can potentially limit harmful effects such as misinterpreting messages and consuming false information. This protective effect may be especially important for adolescents of color who may experience depression or anxiety due to the consumption of racist and discriminatory messages online (Tynes, 2018).

**Digital Application of Critical and Social Literacy Practices**

There are a multitude of practices outside of direct digital and social media use that can help strengthen student skills that can be applied in social media contexts. Specifically, teachers can strengthen critical literacy practices in the classroom that apply to media and social media literacies. Critical literacy, or the ability to identify purposes, motives, and potential biases of texts through multiple contextual lenses, helps bolster traditional reading comprehension and helps adolescents to form their views on the world at large (Vasquez, 2019). Burnett and Merchant provide a guiding framework for exploring digital texts through critical literacy practices, encouraging students to ask the following questions: "Who is making what, and with whom and with what? What are the ethics of production? What is made? Who and what else is implicated? Whose interests are served? How do the different layers of making interface?" (2019). Through the media analysis projects, students looked critically at the messages of different texts and analyzed the digital affordances that may be used to enhance these messages. Encouraging this type of inquiry can help students strengthen their ability to deeply question texts from a variety of angles to enhance comprehension that will serve them in social media contexts. For younger students, practicing this skill early can help

them to more fully comprehend texts received both digitally and traditionally.

One positive aspect of social media platforms is their ability to show multiple viewpoints through posts, comments, and shared content. Teaching critical literacy should include expanded access to multiple texts and structured inquiry of the messages implicitly and explicitly promoted by the text (Muhammed, 2018). This should include an analysis of where texts originate and how they are spread. As secondary teachers begin to explore multiple texts through digital spaces, teaching media and critical media literacy become not only important, but imperative to help students understand these messages to their full abilities. Teachers should provide texts explicitly promoting multiple viewpoints to practice critical literacy skills and perspective-taking rather than providing one text to explain a point. Providing opportunities for students to analyze multiple perspectives, particularly when these perspectives are conflicting, can help to increase comprehension by pushing students to think outside of their comfort zones and better integrate new ideas into their existing knowledge (Richter et al., 2020).

Finally, in terms of social literacy in the realm of social media, educators are positioned to encourage strategies that have been shown to help foster empathy, or the ability to visualize and feel others' perspectives and respond appropriately, amongst students. Empathy develops through social interactions and discussions which can be facilitated in the classroom across content areas (Diazgranados, 2016). Writing activities, particularly when implemented with high frequency, have been shown to foster empathy (Çelimli and Higdon, 2019). When students are tasked to write about real-world experiences, they are made to delve into issues of empathy by

having to visualize the perspectives of characters or key figures. In addition to fostering student empathy, it is also important for teachers to continue to develop their own empathetic skills and understand their shortcomings, as understanding the viewpoints of students has positive outcomes including increased student achievement (Muhammed, 2018).

Similarly, by providing students ample time to interact with each other, teachers are helping to develop the social literacies necessary to navigate relationships online. Small or whole group discussion can be specifically facilitated to talk about social media issues such as privacy and managing online friendships to help students troubleshoot areas of potential difficulty (Livingstone, 2014). Upon completion of both the media diary and the media analysis project, students were prompted to discuss these assignments in groups. Meaningful discussion of the major themes emerged and were later shared with the group at large. Many of the students discussed how they did not necessarily think about how other people could interpret different posts and shared content. At the end of the course, a few students even jokingly said that they would never again be able to mindlessly scroll through social media without thinking of these concepts.

When individuals consume texts, they integrate new information with existing knowledge and experiences (Richter et al., 2020). Similarly, consuming media and texts through digital media platforms such as social media contributes significantly to how adolescents view themselves within the context of their relationship to others (Hobbs, 2006). As such, it stands that literacy, including digital, media, and critical literacy, is a key component to building one's overall self-concept and to help manage individual identities through reading information that surrounds us. As

adolescents are engaged in the key developmental tasks of building their self-concepts and exploring their social and romantic identities, understanding the messages received through digital platforms such as social media is vital beyond the academic context. Educators can support the fluid nature of self-concept and identities for students through literacy practices that inspire students to challenge and reconceptualize their perceptions of themselves and others while also providing meaningful context to practice essential digital skills.

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