

## Chapter 15

# Nurturing Freedom of Speech and Digital Literacy on Children

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### A. A Solid Knot to Digital Literacy

The notion of literacy traditionally is associated with the medium of writing. Many attempts have been extended to accommodate a more general medium. Towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, some emerging concepts of literacy include visual literacy (Moore & Dwyer, 1994), television literacy (Buckingham, 1993), and information literacy (Bruce, 1997). The latter has a solid knot to digital literacy, once a terminology that was not clearly defined, especially around the birth of computers.

Nowadays, most digital literacy discussions revolve around information processing (Marcum, 2002). This should not be regarded solely in terms of what computers do, nor should it be associated with using computers to do online searches. The core of digital literacy is

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not limited to instrumental literacy but also to understanding the skill set. This means asking critical questions about the source of any information, possessing the ability to relate those to broader social pictures, and communicating those ideas with others.

Although the emergence of digital media translates to easier exchange of information, it also allows us to conceal personal information. The protection of personal identity inevitably is taken a step too far by some people to hide in anonymity to threaten the balance of online interactions. People use anonymity to perform offensive acts, frauds, and even crimes (Palme, 2002). Uncivil behaviors and the distribution of fake news on the internet persist under the assumption of freedom of thought and free speech.

This chapter discusses the strategies for embracing digital citizenship for young children by considering the interplay between the freedom of speech with the potential digital threats that might ensue in the context of young children. Such an interplay requires understanding digital intelligence, which must be fostered early.

The organization of this chapter is as follows. Section B discusses the core concept of free speech, dating back as early as the ancient Greeks. In Section C, the notion of digital literacy is discussed as well as its impact on children. The following two sections discuss teachers' roles in fostering children's free speech and digital intelligence. Section D is focused on our take on what the role of teachers should be, followed by a more specialized discussion on their roles during the COVID-19 pandemic in Section E. We also talk about the role of parents in Section F, followed by a conclusion in the last section.

## **B. The Notion of Free Speech**

Under Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), everyone has the fundamental right to form opinions and express oneself without fear of retaliation. Perhaps somewhat foreshadowed, the same article also allows for restrictions to be imposed, among other things, for the rights of others.

Ancient Greeks are one of the earliest civilizations that introduced the notion of free speech. This tradition was linked to democratic governance, where men could freely speak their minds when debating public issues. However, this did not go well for Socrates, who was sentenced to death by poison in his trial for rejecting Athenian religious practices and corrupting the youth. This disregard for free speech was arguably extraordinary since Athenians believed an offense to the gods would incur their wrath on the whole city. We have seen evidence of limitations of free speech as early as 399 BC (Kraut, 1984).

The acknowledgment of freedom of speech was highlighted in essential documents as early as the 17th century, such as The Declaration of the Rights of Man and the First Amendment of the US Bill of Rights, both instrumental in the French Revolution and the early stages of the United States (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 1789; United States Senate, 1787). There have been many discussions on the freedom of speech by prominent philosophers in the past three centuries, such as John Stuart Mill, Immanuel Kant, and Spinoza (Bejan, 2017).

The wake of digitalization in the late 20th century brought up another dimension of said freedom. The introduction of the internet means connectivity between people on a whole new level. Online search engines have been instrumental in our everyday lives so that any information we wish to seek can be found in a matter of seconds at the palm of our hand, a concept that people in the past would probably have a hard time understanding.

Recent statistics by Google showed that there are 40,000 searches processed every second on average. That, of course, does not include the searches on other search-engine platforms. The new data that internet users create every day exceeds 2.5 quintillion bytes. To give some perspective, that is 2.5 million terabytes of data per day (Marr, 2018). This staggering amount of information inevitably comes with a caveat: that the threat of misinformation is getting more imminent to everyone, and young children are no exception.

Putting the grim side effect aside, digitalization has fostered the growth of the education sector worldwide. Computer-based technology has the absolute power to improve young children's literacy experiences and engagement. In recent years, the shift to online learning has tremendously impacted the future of education, especially during the pandemic era.

There are, however, some negative consequences that experts have forewarned from the incorporation of technology into teaching. Research has shown that there is a general decrease in children's attention span, which aligns with autism spectrum disorder-like symptoms (Chonchaiya et al., 2011; Heffler et al., 2020), not to mention various health issues that follow from spending hours sitting in front of a computer or looking at a bright screen, such as early childhood myopia, disturbed circadian rhythms, sleep loss, depression, even addiction (Dresp-Langley, 2020).

### **C. Fostering Digital Intelligence**

The term digital literacy arguably became famous after being introduced by Gilster in his book *Digital Literacy* (Gilster, 1997). Digital literacy has evolved into a set of fundamental skills to use and produce any digital media wisely, process and retrieve any information, participate in social networks, and a wide range of professional computing skills (UNESCO, 2011). The early definitions of computer-related literacies also emphasize the development of sets of norms and technical capabilities. However, this concept had broadened significantly by the end of the twentieth century.

People's understanding of digital literacy, including that of their own, varies. While there are many frameworks for measuring one's level of digital literacy, there have been some approaches to unify these frameworks (Davydov et al., 2020). At the very least, digitally literate people ought to understand how to use the technology they are provided with. Nowadays, most individuals are familiar with downloading applications on their mobile phones, utilizing various search engines to retrieve information, and creating a social media

account. On the other hand, those habits reflect our current usage of digital technology in our daily lives.

Young children may spend their online time doing activities such as using social media, playing games, listening to music, or watching videos and learning. These activities mediate communication not only between students and teachers or teachers and parents but also between teachers themselves. Despite all the potential that digitalization brings to the table, it is undeniable that there are some drawbacks along the way. Higgins et al. (2008) indicated that a lack of digital literacy leads to a lack of self-control, thus leading to cyber abuse. Children with a low digital literacy ability may become addicted to utilizing electronics.

On the other hand, the freedom to interact with anyone on social media, including strangers, has inevitable harmful consequences, with cyberbullying being the most common. There are many forms of cyberbullying, hate speech being one of them. The EU community defines this notion as utterances that encourage, promote, or justify hatred, frequently connected with a particular tribe, race, or religion. Hate speech is an expression of intolerance towards other people. Another perspective defines hate speech as a form of language that attacks and advocates violence (State of the Union, 2020).

Another approach to fighting hate speech is education, besides speaking up about equality, inclusion, and diversity. The more individuals are taught about bullying, cyberbullying, harassment, and hate crimes, the better we are equipped to avoid them in the future. A futurist, Richard Worzel, encouraged individuals to consider the future of digital literacy. These optimistic future scenarios prompt today's educators to appropriately prepare students for the change to come (Worzel, undated). It is essential to bring digital literacy into the national curriculum.

UNICEF considers that digital literacy and skills are critical for children to have meaningful internet access, allowing them to be safe and effective online while exercising their rights, such as the right to privacy, freedom of speech, information, and education (UNICEF

2018). DigComp is a digital literacy competency framework that is well-known and frequently used. DigComp was developed in 2013 by the European Commission's Joint Research Centre (JRC) (Ferrari, 2013). The most recent version, DigComp 2.1, focuses on increasing the initial three proficiency levels to a more fine-grained eight-level description and presenting examples of its application. DigComp identifies 21 competencies and five areas: information and data literacy, communication and collaboration, digital content creator, safety, and problem-solving (Carretero Gomez et al., 2017; Vuorikari, 2016).

The inclusion of digital literacy in the national curriculum is significant. In a world where half of the population is online, including 70% of 15-24-year-olds (International Telecommunication Union, 2020), it becomes critical that individuals have the skills to take advantage of digital possibilities and the internet. This is especially relevant for children, who spend more time online than adults and are thus more exposed to the advantages and disadvantages of being connected. Digital literacy is required for first-time users as the second half of the globe goes online and the internet expands into new sectors.

All the research on digital literacy points towards the same direction that fostering digital literacy in children as early as possible is instrumental in creating future citizens who are more responsible, employable, and tolerant.

## **D. Redefining the Roles of Teachers**

In this section, we shall look at various ways teachers can act to promote freedom of speech and foster digital intelligence among young children. These, as we shall see, require an understanding that integrating technology into teaching is inevitable to keep up with the modern challenges.

In the changing world, teachers' role has become increasingly more complex. They are expected to become more technologically adept to enhance their teaching quality and students' learning experience. More precisely, they need to personalize their students' needs

while simultaneously ensuring that the learning objectives are satisfied as a collective group in this digital era.

However, educators have no consensus on embracing technological changes without discounting the face-to-face interaction between teachers and students. The current pandemic has also made them constantly seek ways to incorporate digital tools to assist with their day-to-day duties, with studying from home compulsory in almost all parts of the world.

While ideally, teachers and parents should exchange ideas in fostering the student's educational needs, recent research suggests significant challenges to connecting school and home learning (Hutchison et al., 2020). They indicated that the main problem is the lack of clear communication between the two parties to achieve a common objective. As teachers' and parents' degrees of digital literacy vary, what matters in achieving this common goal is being technologically adept at making the students' learning process as simple as possible.

There are critical criteria for educators to ensure innovative learning methods through digital means. Weinberger et al. (2002) suggested that some critical criteria include being open-minded in embracing changes, being active collaborators in bridging students with what they need to know, and facilitating students with their point of view on new topics.

Suppose we want to incorporate digital literacy into these criteria. In that case, a digitally literate teacher must also be capable of selecting the appropriate technology for their classroom, leading students through its use, and utilizing that technology to stimulate critical thinking and creativity. Aside from that, teachers must be aware of the infrastructure that their students have in hand. The good news is that teachers have made efforts to incorporate technology into early childhood education (Lindeman et al., 2021).

One of the said efforts lies in building a framework to identify digital threats in the school. This also includes coming up with a strategy to manage such hazards. In terms of cyberbullying, a scheme called the Cyberbullying Conceptual Framework was proposed to bet-

ter understand the elements that constitute cyberbullying (Redmond et al., 2020). Lately, several investigations have collected teachers' perspectives on cyberbullying in various countries (Huang & Chou, 2013; Yilmaz, 2010).

Research by Helwig (1998) shows that children—especially older ones—can justify freedom of speech. This development of mindset is not possible if there is a lack of support from their teachers. It appears that the teaching of freedom of speech must be carefully arranged and is a worthwhile undertaking (Rossiter, 1969).

This suggests a connection between teaching freedom of speech and digital intelligence. The freedom of speech should motivate children to express their thoughts with clear and established boundaries, letting them explore the depths of the digital world to collect various information.

It is worth stressing that technology should be used to enhance the learning experience and not replace the role of teachers. Educators must constantly find a creative way to incorporate digital literacy into their students and ensure they fully understand what works for them. When they do not understand the technology, its usefulness is lost.

## **E. Opportunities of Accelerated Digital Literacy towards Educators in the COVID-19 Situation**

The preceding discussion on the role of teachers in instilling digital literacy is especially more relevant in the present challenge that the world is currently facing. The COVID-19 pandemic, although in most the countries has subsided, is far from over and serves as a model for potential future pandemics that may arise.

The global COVID-19 pandemic has made physical distancing more necessary than ever, prompting a change to the traditional way teaching and learning has always been done. This is a challenge for educators, especially since they must adjust to online learning instantly and manage various teaching and technological issues during this period. One consequence of this shift to online learning is the need for educators to emphasize the importance of digital literacy to



their students. For example, educators need to put into their teaching plan how to interpret and convey information through the practice of reading and writing.

The International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) (2020) defined five competencies of digital citizenship: inclusive, informed, engaged, balanced, and alert. These form a set of qualities that educators need to incorporate to ensure that online learning does not hinder the students' opportunities in the classroom setting.

Several questions need to be addressed by educators to start with, as laid out in (Buchholz et al., 2020). Among those, one question focuses on the ability to validate the information spread out while keeping informed simultaneously. This requires the educators to provide multiple perspectives on one topic and stimulate discussion among students on what meaning is involved in each point of view. This will teach the students to appreciate a different point of view better and think critically before jumping to a conclusion.

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the need for educators to introduce the concept of freedom of speech respectfully. This goal will be possible by introducing digital citizenship to the school's curriculum.

## **F. Parental Inclusions in Embracing Digital Citizenship amongst Children**

As with other aspects of young children's learning experience, the parental role is critical in ensuring learning continuity. It might even be argued that children grasp more in their home by observing their parents; thus, parents have a vital role in embracing digital citizenship among their children.

As technology becomes more integrated into the child's education, it is critical to grasp both the advantages and disadvantages. Parents should understand issues like screen time, safe web-browsing content, cyberbullying threats, and general internet safety as children become older than before. Teaching the kids how to deal with these

circumstances effectively is critical in enabling them to utilize the technology available and become excellent digital citizens fully.

Once kids are exposed to the digital world, they are introduced to a brand-new world with its laws and expectations. It takes time to develop effective digital citizenship, but with consistent encouragement and practice, children will be displaying responsible technology usage in no time (Livingstone et al., 2011). Parents must regularly remind the kids about basic internet safety, such as not disclosing passwords, avoiding strangers, utilizing reliable information sources, developing basic manners when interacting with people on the internet, and reporting any suspicious or malicious activity. These actions may seem obvious to the adult parents, but certainly not for someone just starting with technology. Having these talks with the child can help establish ground rules and expectations.

A typical day for most youngsters comprises a mixture of TV, internet, social media, video games, and smartphone usage, depending on what is available. This is a lot of media exposure, which might prompt parents to be cautious, given that youngsters are more receptive to influences than adults. Parents must ensure they know the type of content their children watch daily and whether it is acceptable for their ages. Moreover, parental evaluation of the media is instrumental, which can be done by discussing whether the content is safe and teaches positive values to the children. Another benefit of doing so is the possibility for more in-depth family talks about how media affects real-life events, which will help the kids develop a broader perspective.

Data-based platforms always risk data breaches, especially those that store our data. This is even more dangerous when the data collected are from minors. Internet safety and privacy are among the first lessons parents must tell their children (Livingstone et al., 2011). Parents need to monitor the information their children post online, ensuring that children do not reveal personal data being the bare minimum. They need to make sure their children are aware that once anything—and they need to stress this—is uploaded on the internet, it becomes public information, which people can save or share with a

broader set of people. Some of the suggestions parents can make are but are not limited to utilizing the internet privacy setting, limiting the scope of the audience when posting, using aliases or identities, and turning off location settings to minimize the risk of tracking.

How a message is conveyed can sometimes render a misunderstanding. Online messaging is especially prone to this risk since it lacks the context of face-to-face conversation (Candela, undated). Children need parental assistance in this aspect: something intended as a joke might hurt a classmate who does not have the whole context. Parents must emphasize the necessity of being mindful in texting and teach the kids to handle problems that might arise correctly. They must be encouraged to consider many interpretations of their writing and courteously.

Developing digital literacy skills and becoming a good digital citizen are essential aspects of learning (Milenkova & Lendzhova, 2021). They both provide a ground set of moral compasses as technology changes. Ultimately, we want them to respect people they meet online and approach them the same way as in face-to-face encounters. A parent should be the first to tell if they need assistance developing these abilities by having focused dialogues and reminding them regularly.

## **G. Conclusion**

The freedom of speech that has emerged in a different form than its first creativity can be a double-edged sword in this digital world if no proper precautionary action is taken. A notion of intelligence that applies from the late 20<sup>th</sup> century was established as guidelines for people in this digitally oriented world.

Digital intelligence needs to be fostered as early as possible to expose the children to a different world of connectivity that the internet offers. Children do not know how harmful a wrong turn in managing their digital persona can be if there is no intervention from their teachers and parents.

The need to introduce the concept of digital intelligence to young children has become more imminent than ever, and this can be done

through careful explanations from teachers and parents. As such, we discussed two approaches to introducing to the children how to be good digital citizens.

Teachers must have certain qualities to be digitally literate, reflected in their teaching and, eventually, their students' understanding. Parents must support this at home by patrolling their children's digital activity and emphasizing technology's benefits and risks.

We then touched upon one of the negative impacts of digitalization that arises from overdoing one's freedom of speech. There is a need to incorporate the concept of freedom of speech in any teaching structure and build a conceptual framework to manage better conflicts that may arise by carefully redefining the elements associated with said conflicts. Parents can further enhance this awareness of going digital at home by employing several strategies.

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