Digital Citizenship During a Global Pandemic: Moving Beyond Digital Literacy

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As daily life and instruction have shifted to online communities and at-home spaces, what steps can educators take to model and facilitate effective digital citizenship practices?

In the opening of his book on digital citizenship, Ribble (2015) provoked readers by posing the following rhetorical question: “Why should anyone—administrators, teachers, parents, students—even be concerned with such a thing as a ‘digital society?’” (p. 7). Five years later, in a world that hardly seems recognizable, it is no longer a rhetorical question. The global COVID-19 pandemic necessitated that citizens across the globe practice social/physical distancing. Public places and businesses where people previously gathered were closed. Educators, many of whom were not well versed in technology, were suddenly tasked with moving school-based learning to online. Immediately, they were confronted with a multitude of thorny teaching, learning, and technological issues that made problems of equity and access more apparent than ever.

In this commentary, we explore the relation between citizenship and the rapidly evolving digital world by looking to the present moment. We begin with a discussion of education, citizenship, and the digital world in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. We then make an argument that critical digital literacy and citizenship must be viewed as participatory. Next, we explore classroom implications within the context of the four ethically complex questions posed by the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE; 2020). Finally, we examine inequities that have become increasingly evident as a result of the pandemic.

Citizenship in a Time of Crisis

To slow the pandemic, government leaders explicitly called on all citizens to do their part to stop the spread of the virus and prevent unnecessary deaths. Ad campaigns called for unity (e.g., “apart but not alone”). Hashtags circulating on social media reflected calls on citizens to take simple, individual actions for the greater good of the collective: #WashYourHands, #BendTheCurve, and #IStayHomeFor. Citizens were challenged to sift through the digital debris that cluttered the web (e.g., maps, graphs, articles, charts, videos), to discern accurate information about COVID-19. Politically contentious discourse and conspiracy theories made learning to live safely and taking care of one another in/across digital spaces problematic.

We are called to move from theorizing schools’ role in preparing youth to live civically engaged, literate lives online in the future to considering the high stakes and ethical implications of inviting youth to participate in this work now. Schools’ abrupt move to remote/e-learning may ultimately strengthen the digital literacy practices of students and teachers. For this to become

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Digital Citizenship: Critical Digital Literacy as Participation/Engagement

Citizenship is a complex interplay among democracy, community, and schooling. As Dewey (1916) argued, a democracy "is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" (p. 83). This form of government requires a community with a shared set of values, and citizens who engage responsibly in social and political activities.

Educators must recognize that democracy, as is true of all complex social phenomena, cannot be directly taught. There can be no successful curriculum that outlines and abstractly instructs youth on how to be responsible democratic citizens. Critical digital civic literacy (Garcia, Mirra, Morrell, Martinez, & Scorza, 2015), as is the case of democratic citizenship more generally, requires moving from learning about citizenship to participating and engaging in democratic communities face-to-face, online, and in all the spaces in between. Classrooms and schools, as well as other educational contexts, must become democratic communities.

In tracing back ideas surrounding educating for democracy, Westheimer and Kahne’s (2004) work is critical. They pointed out the wide spectrum of beliefs and understandings undergirding educational programs that were aimed at developing good citizens. Different programs and pedagogies have quite different, sometimes conflicting, ideas about what good citizenship is and what good citizens do. Westheimer and Kahne ultimately offered three conceptions of the good citizen embodied in education: the personally responsible citizen, the participatory citizen, and the justice-oriented citizen. More recent work (e.g., Krutka & Carpenter, 2017; Mattson & Curran, 2017) has extended descriptions of these conceptions of citizenship to reflect the influx of digital tools and practices required, alongside considering new challenges and opportunities for teachers in educating for democracy. Along with these scholars, we reject conceptions of citizenship as simply a predetermined status based on geography and/or personal responsibilities. Instead, citizenship must be viewed from a complex sociocultural perspective of moral and civic identity development “that is constantly negotiated through everyday practice” (Nasir & Kirshner, 2003, p. 139). Citizenship must be viewed as participatory.

Part of what we see constituting these practices are digital literacies, or socially situated practices “supported by skills, strategies, and stances that enable the representation and understanding of ideas using a range of modalities enabled by digital tools” (O’Brien & Scharber, 2008, pp. 66–67). Being a digitally literate citizen encompasses the ability to read, write, and interact online across screens to engage with diverse online communities, with an orientation for social justice. Within this larger frame of digital literacy, we advocate a critical literacy pedagogy that enables students to think at deeper levels about not simply how to read and compose in online environments but also how to do so as productive, responsible, and critical digital citizens.

Being a digital citizen calls for more than just technical skill. It also requires individuals to confront complex ideas about the enactment of identities and dialogue online as citizens who collectively work for equity and change. As Mirra (2020) pointed out (in a very meta tweet), education must move away from “training youth to accept a dysfunctional civic life that is built upon + perpetuates INEQUITY” and move toward a view of digital citizenship where schools support “youth to use their LITERACIES to dream of and design LIBERATING CIVIC FUTURES!”

Digital Citizenship in the Classroom

COVID-19 has necessitated that citizens of all ages use digital literacy practices to learn, stay informed, and care for and connect with family, friends, and communities near and far. These changes require educators to question how reading and writing practices are shaped by the rapid-fire pace of information and to explore the best ways to model and nurture critical digital citizenship. Lists of technical proficiencies and simplistic rules for safely engaging online have dominated the curricula for digital citizenship. A more participatory account of both democracy and literacy asks educators to consider how "good [online] citizens...[might] work toward common
goods and the flourishing of themselves and others...[by] participa[ting] in civil and political life, critiqu[ing] problems in the world, and ameliorat[ing] them through hopeful inquiry and action” (Stitzlein, 2020, p. 83).

In moving from theorizing digital citizenship to practical implications for classrooms, the ISTE’s (2020) framework for digital citizenship (#digcit) is particularly thought-provoking. In their most recent #digcit commit campaign, ISTE identified ethically complex questions that youth must negotiate as they civically participate in/across communities online. We have adapted the following four questions from #digcit commit to promote further inquiry:

1. How can I stay informed by evaluating the accuracy, perspective, and validity of online sources?
2. How can I locate and/or develop spaces online where I can engage respectfully with people who have different beliefs and experiences than me?
3. How can I use technology to engage, participate, and be a force for good in my community?
4. How can I learn to balance my screen time with other activities and social interaction?

We appreciate how these questions implicitly integrate the three conceptions of good (digital) citizenship (Krutka & Carpenter, 2017; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). These questions help educators think deeply about ethical decisions faced when using digital tools/platforms to engage with others (i.e., a participatory citizen) and to create more equitable communities (i.e., a justice-oriented citizen). However, we push back on ISTE’s (2020) use of the term competencies to describe the skills and knowledge that citizens need to navigate these questions. Instead, we recommend thinking about socially situated literacy practices that youth need to agentically participate in/across online communities.

We see a desperate need to nurture digital citizenship in classroom communities, both in face-to-face interactions and in online instruction. More than ever, engaging in civic discourse in online communities is a pressing concern. We now offer a series of classroom invitations rooted in inviting youth to critically engage in the kinds of digital literacy practices foregrounded and necessitated by citizenship in light of COVID-19. With each idea, we provide an overview of the kinds of practices and issues that educators might consider.

The ideas offered here are intended to facilitate educators’ thinking about their own contexts and students rather than serving as a specific list of activities. We introduce a teacher, Ms. Borders (pseudonym), as part of the classroom exploration and reflect on her statements about the sudden move to online teaching. Although we do not have a clear picture of what instruction will look like in the post-COVID-19 world, we offer ideas to stimulate teachers’ thinking in moving forward.

**Sifting Voices: How Can I Stay Informed by Evaluating the Accuracy, Perspective, and Validity of Online Sources?**

**Classroom Invitation.** Take a look at the map titled “Where America Didn’t Stay Home Even as the Virus Spread”, which was posted on The New York Times website in April (Glanz, Carey, Holder, Watkins, Valentino-DeVries, Rojas, & Leatherby, 2020). Working in small groups, discuss and jot notes in response to the following questions: What do you notice? What does this mean? What do you wonder? Now take a look at the second map titled “No Car and No Supermarket Within a Mile” (see Figure 1). What do you notice? What does this mean? What do you wonder? How does this map help you see/understand the first map differently? What new questions do you have now? What other map could you pair with the first map to highlight a different perspective or produce a different conversation online?

**Overview.** As COVID-19 began to spread around the globe in early 2020, World Health Organization Director-General Dr. Tedros Ghebreyesus (2020) stated, “We’re not just fighting an epidemic; we’re fighting an infodemic” (para. 44). COVID-19 has highlighted the life-and-death implications of citizens being able to evaluate the validity of digital sources of information, including graphs, charts, tables, and videos. With federal, state, and local government leaders offering varying and often conflicting advice, citizens must piece together sources/texts online to inform their answers to critical questions such as these: Should I stop traveling? Should I wear a mask? Is social/physical distancing working? When is it safe to go back to work? The findings of a study conducted during the onset of the COVID-19 crisis in the United States suggest that where and how citizens get their news has a relation to health outcomes due to the virus (Bursztyn, Rao, Roth, & Yanagizawa-Drott, 2020).

The paired map invitation offers youth an opportunity to consider what it means to thoughtfully and accurately communicate information. This close reading of digital texts is necessary for addressing and
rereading biases that are expressed anonymously in online communities. These biases are often projected into the political arena. The ethical questions that citizens face when sifting through texts go beyond sorting fact from fiction. They include considering which perspectives are visible or missing, and actively seeking out perspectives that address a range of experiences and expertise. The COVID-19 crisis has been an experiential reminder that determining (in)accuracy entails more than relying on an expert to assign credibility to a claim.

Digital citizenship includes evaluating multimodal texts on the move and making meaning by positioning texts alongside other texts. This kind of work involves the willingness to critically consider other perspectives and to hold dialogue about where these perspectives originate and how they are used in meaning making. This leads to skill in compromise and consensus building, the cornerstones of democracy.

Constructive Discourse: How Can I Locate and/or Develop Spaces Online Where I Can Engage Respectfully With People Who Have Different Beliefs and Experiences Than Me?

Classroom Invitation. Let’s brainstorm possible answers to the following questions together: How can I make sure that I am creating an environment that feels safe and welcoming to everyone? How can I use online spaces to learn about others’ experiences? In what ways can I show sensitivity to the needs of my classroom community members who may be experiencing different challenges? What are the best ways that I can make sure we are living and working in a productive space? When I encounter an opinion that I disagree with, what is my best response?

Overview. Ms. Borders noted that moving her class to an online environment meant that the class had to
invent new ways to build community. This generated new concerns to think about. Although Ms. Borders called online instruction a “lifeline,” she recognized that there are potential threats to consider. One such threatening practice is Zoombombing, which Bond (2020) described as a kind of “harassment...in which intruders hijack video calls and post hate speech and offensive images such as pornography” (para. 1).

Educators must work with students to build an understanding of internet etiquette, or netiquette, which “are guidelines for maintaining civilized, professional, and effective communication in the online environment and email exchanges” (Quality Matters, 20202020, “Netiquette,” para. 1). Discussion about constructive discourse, whether online, in print, or in person, serves as another aspect of what it means to be a productive citizen. Engaging students in dialogue is a good first step.

**Political and Power Shifts: How Can I Use Technology to Engage, Participate, and Be a Force for Good in My Community?**

**Classroom Invitation.** Notice the ways in which hashtags are used to bring attention to social issues. As learners, we can practice the power of hashtags in online spaces. What hashtags would you use to spread a positive message of democracy? What other social media platforms might you use, and what tools exist in these platforms that would further your message?

**Overview.** Our notions of school have moved from a physical building where teachers and youth come together each day, to include a collection of digital platforms that allow for synchronous and asynchronous connections. Teachers and youth are now faced with questions about how to sustain community. Given the opportunities that readers experience for communication, there is a participatory shift that takes place in online materials. What users create online is often dynamic, as others are invited to engage in using social media designed to promote participation. This communal sharing of ideas relates to both the volume of what is shared and a consideration of content analysis (Anderson, Toor, Rainie, & Smith, 2018).

This work would ideally be modeled by adults and school leaders as educators explore the kind of discourse that is found in social media platforms and the destructive rhetoric that is afforded by online anonymity. Students must be engaged in processes designed to consider perspectives from digital texts, including social media accounts, online articles, and posted comments. The think-aloud is a powerful strategy to help students negotiate accounts of the same event from disparate perspectives.

**Balance: How Can I Learn to Balance My Screen Time With Other Activities and Social Interactions?**

**Classroom Invitation.** The move to online learning requires that we engage in more screen time. To get a sense of how much time you are spending online, please maintain a weekly account of screen reports in a personal journal. Reflect on what is happening around you. This is an assignment that you do not have to post or share. Instead, take this time to build a journaling practice that takes you away from your technology for a while.

**Overview.** Family life has become much more insulated during the COVID-19 pandemic. This experience leads to questions of how much time should be spent engaged with digital technology. Examining screen time includes an emphasis on quality over quantity and depends on content and context (Cheng & Wilkinson, 2020). Engaging students in an examination of screen time provides both the students and the teacher with data to explore how much and what kinds of screen time are productive and healthy.

Ms. Borders included options for her students in projects, including Google tools and website creation, while balancing the need to share assignments in print format. This is an issue that speaks to the well-being of not only students but also teachers. Wolk (2020) offered this advice for teachers: “Do whatever it is you need to do right now to get your footing. And that includes not enforcing screen time rules or schedules just yet if you can’t be bothered” (para. 5).

**Proposing One Larger Ethical Question at the Root of Digital Citizenship**

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed inequities that were less obvious in the context of face-to-face learning, particularly in relation to access to digital devices and dependable broadband. We propose an additional ethical question that youth/educators/citizens are called to navigate in the weeks, months, and years ahead: How can we be aware of whose voices are missing online, and work to promote access and equity in relation to technology? This is an issue that calls each one of us to engage in justice-oriented digital citizenship, not just teach about or facilitate opportunities in our classrooms.
Almost 10 years ago, the call for schools to become more permeable spaces was part of the literacy community’s thinking. Rogers, Purcell-Gates, Mahiri, and Bloome (2000) proposed the concept of a “cybersegregation in the digital knowledge economy” (p. 422). Coiro (2020) presciently called for educators to consider what digital practices mean in both formal and informal learning environments. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought the digital divide to the surface while revealing continued disparities experienced among ethnic and social groups.

Dealing with this sense of inequity hints at more work to be done for effective digital citizenship to occur. Including activities that require students to be part of online communication can quickly illustrate who is missing from the roster. Once these missing faces and voices are identified, additional steps can be taken. This can be an opportunity for teachers to engage in digital citizenship. Online discussions with other teachers and well-designed internet searches can uncover resources for addressing social, economic, and academic differences.

Innovative resources are extensive. For example, Elliott (2020) reported on the emergence of VA TV Classroom on Virginia public television stations, allowing students to engage in educational programming similar to what children experienced in the 1980s and 1990s. Unlike the programming of that era, VA TV Classroom features instruction offered by local teachers, working at particular levels of instruction. Although the use of television may be considered old tech, VA TV Classroom demonstrates one avenue for addressing inequity.

Final Thoughts

The COVID-19 crisis provides the opportunity to think deeply about what it means to be a “good [digital] citizen...[now by] participat[ing] in civil and political life, critiqu[ing] problems in the world, and ameliorat[ing] them through hopeful inquiry and action” (Stitzlein, 2020, p. 83). It is important to be prepared for the reality that we are sure to face additional crises in the near future. An obvious parallel is the climate change crisis: citizens accessing (dis)information, the need for sacrifice and collective action for the good of communities beyond one’s own city or state, and the reality that climate change will “take[e] the largest toll on poor and vulnerable people, and these impacts are largely caused by inequalities” (United Nations, 2016, para. 1) that are tragically enduring yet rectifiable.

Ultimately, our work in literacy must be aimed at addressing questions that will continue into a future that is impossible to foresee. It is important that when “choosing between alternatives, we should ask ourselves not only how to overcome the immediate threat, but also what kind of world[s] we will inhabit once the storm passes” (Harari, 2020, para. 1). Countries around the world face perilous choices around digital surveillance, national isolation/global solidarity, public understanding of science, and the role of the media. These issues are bound together with digital tools, spaces, and practices. Citizens—not just governments—have a critical role to play in what kind of world and what kinds of schools we inhabit now and post-pandemic. Educators must be prepared to play a central role in helping nurture digital citizens who can engage ethically to (re-)create a more equitable world.

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