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EMPOWERING LEARNERS WITH DIGITAL AND MEDIA LITERACY

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Ever since my childhood, I've never been able to distinguish between school librarians and teachers. When I was growing up, the terms were synonymous. That's because my mother, Rosemarie Shilcusky, was a sixth-grade English and social studies teacher who also became the founding school librarian at Our Lady of Good Counsel School in Plymouth, Michigan. In the process of getting her graduate degree in 1966, she came to realize that her students and colleagues needed a school library, so she lobbied hard for one, petitioning the priests in the diocese and sweet-talking the school principal. In the grand low-budget Roman Catholic tradition, she eventually earned the right to build the library herself, right there in the basement of the school, applying her own special brand of sweat equity to the process of learning librarianship with the help of local volunteers and members of the Michigan chapter of the Catholic Library Association.

I remember many summers spent processing and shelving and reading books, delighting in the opportunity to be the first one to crack open the many treasures of children's literature that my mother was acquiring for the school. There were scads of magazines and audio cassettes, of course. And when VHS tapes were invented, they became part of the library collection, too; later, there were desktop computers with software on giant floppy disks.

Today, school librarians and teachers are working together in a national movement to bring digital and media literacy to all citizens. When people think of the term "literacy," what generally springs to mind is reading and writing, speaking and listening. These are indeed foundational elements of literacy. But because people use so many different types of expression and communication in daily life, the concept of literacy is beginning to be defined as the ability to share meaning through symbol systems to fully participate in society.

Similarly, the term "text" is beginning to be understood as any form of expression or communication in fixed and tangible form that uses symbol systems, including language, still and moving images, graphic design, sound, music, and interactivity.

New types of texts and new types of literacies have been emerging over a period of more than fifty years, and school librarians and teachers have been continually moving forward with these cultural shifts. We've used many closely interrelated terms to describe the new set of competencies required for success in contemporary society.

In the 1960s, when art educators and others started to explore how to use photography to promote "new ways of seeing," they called it *visual literacy*. When library databases were first established, and people needed new skills to use keywords to find and evaluate sources, we called it *information literacy*. In the 1980s, when cable television brought a five-hundred-channel universe into our homes, we recognized the need to teach critical analysis of popular culture and mass media, calling it *media literacy*. When computers first became commonplace, we understood *computer literacy* as
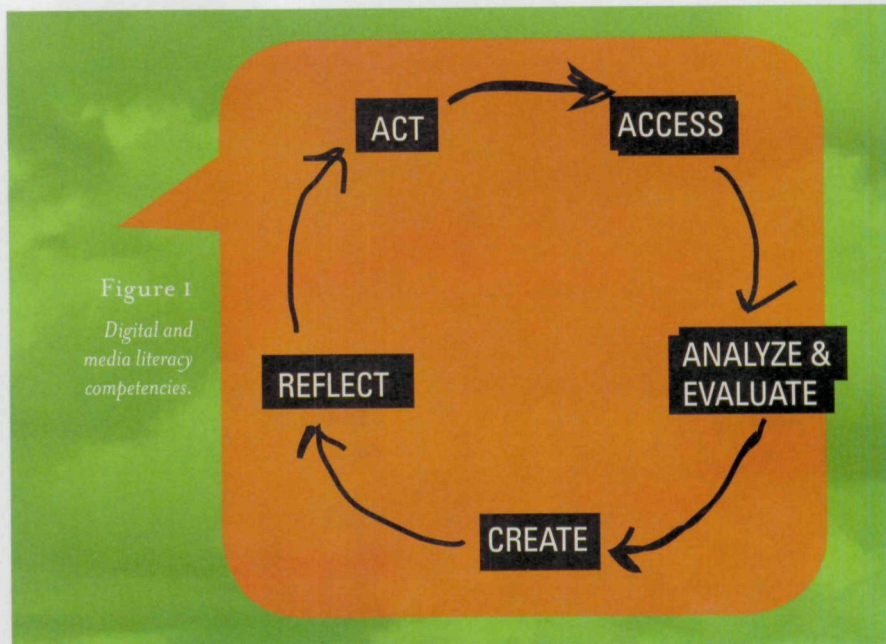

Figure 1

Digital and media literacy competencies.

learning to distinguish between hardware and software. Today the term *digital citizenship* may be used to refer to the new social competencies needed to address cyberbullying, privacy preservation, identity protection, and respect for authorship. These many different terms reflect a variety of disciplinary perspectives as well as the truly wide scope of the knowledge and skills demanded by our increasingly mediated society.

When I use the phrase *digital and media literacy*, I seek to capture the essential features of all these new literacies. I define digital and media literacy competencies that include (1) the use of texts, tools, and technologies to access both information and entertainment; (2) the skills of critical thinking, analysis, and evaluation; (3) the practice of message composition and creativity; (4) the ability to engage in reflection and ethical thinking; as well as (5) active participation in social action through individual and collaborative efforts (see figure 1).

Digital and Media Literacy as Elements of Citizenship

Easy access to so many information and entertainment choices now requires that people acquire new knowledge and skills to make wise and responsible decisions. For people to achieve the personal, professional, and social benefits of thriving in a digital age, these skills are not just optional or desirable—they are the essential elements of digital citizenship.

The Knight Commission's report *Informing Communities: Sustaining Democracy in the Digital Age* recognized that people need news and information to take advantage of life's opportunities for themselves and their families. To be effective participants in contemporary society, people need to be engaged in the public life of the community, the nation, and the world. They need access to relevant and credible information that helps them make decisions. As a result, it will be necessary to strengthen the capacity of individuals to participate as both producers and consumers in public conversations about events and issues that matter. Media and

digital literacy education is now fundamentally implicated in the practice of citizenship. That's why the Knight Commission made three recommendations that directly address the issue of digital and media literacy education in the context of formal and informal public education sectors:

"**Recommendation 6:** Integrate digital and media literacy as critical elements for education at all levels through collaboration among federal, state, and local education officials.

Recommendation 7: Fund and support public libraries and other community institutions as centers of digital and media training, especially for adults.

Recommendation 12: Engage young people in developing the digital information and communication capacities of local communities" (2009, XVII–XVIII).

To turn these recommendations into concrete action steps, I was delighted to be invited to author *Digital and Media Literacy: A Plan of Action*, a policy paper released by The Aspen Institute Communications and Society Program, and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation.

Teachers and school librarians everywhere are recognizing these skills as fundamental. As the Common Core State Standards Initiative points out, "To be ready for college, workforce training, and life in a technological society, students need the ability to gather, comprehend, evaluate, synthesize, report on, and create a high volume and extensive range of print and nonprint texts in media forms old and new. The need to research and to consume and produce media

is embedded into every element of today's curriculum" (2010).

But transformational change does not come about simply by generating documents or developing written standards. In developing a plan of action to bring digital and media literacy to all Americans, I first identify some challenges that educators and librarians must address when implementing programs and services. These challenges include those presented below.

Moving Beyond a Tool-Focused Orientation—Although investments in technology have increased significantly in recent years, simply purchasing the latest digital technologies does not necessarily lead to the acquisition of digital and media literacy competencies. Unfortunately, many school leaders mistakenly believe that simply providing children and young people with access to digital technology will automatically enhance learning. School librarians, teachers, and educational technology leaders can help shift the focus to emphasize how digital tools are used to promote critical thinking, creativity, and communication and collaboration skills.

Addressing Digital Risks—Digital and media literacy competencies are not only needed to strengthen people's capacity for engaging with information but also for addressing the many potential risks associated with exposure to mass media, popular culture, and digital media. For example, the Federal Trade Commission reports that ten million Americans were victimized in 2009 by willingly giving personal information to robbers, often because victims couldn't distinguish an e-mail

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from their banks from an e-mail from a predator (Rothkopf 2009). A significant number of children and young people have been victims of pornography and electronic aggression. Sexting and cyberbullying are examples of how human needs for power, intimacy, trust, and respect intersect with the ethical challenges embedded in social participation in a digital environment. That is why both empowerment and protection are both needed to address the realities of the current multimedia landscape.

Strengthening People's Capacity to Access Message Credibility and Quality—Librarians and researchers tell us that, when

looking for information online, many people give up before they find what they need. People use a small number of search strategies in a repetitive way even when searchers do not get the information they are seeking. They do not take the time to digest and evaluate what they encounter. In many cases, students "typically use information that finds them, rather than deciding what information *they* need" (Cheney 2010, 1). Few people verify the information they find online—both adults and children tend to uncritically trust information they find, from whatever source.

To judge the credibility of information, it is important to begin by answering these three basic questions: Who's the author? What's the purpose of this message? How was this message constructed? These simple but powerful questions enable people to assess the relative credibility of a media message. In fact, for the savvy user, skillful use of digital information can substantially enhance the process of fact checking and source comparison.

Bringing News and Current Events into K–12 Education—For over fifty years civics-oriented education, with its use of everyday news and journalism resources, has been declining as a component of the American education system. Many teachers are uncomfortable bringing news into the classroom. Remember when President Obama's televised back-to-school speech to the nation's schoolchildren was blasted by conservative critics who accused the president of trying to spread propaganda? In an era of competition for and fragmentation of the news audience, no simplistic assumptions can be made about the nature of what information sources count as trustworthy and authoritative.

Today, young people tell us that the news is a significant source of

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stress because it reminds them of the peril the world is in, and makes them feel unsafe and threatened. Although teens read the news only incidentally, when they do, they prefer news about music, entertainment, celebrities, and sports (Vahlberg, Peer, and Nesbit 2008). Still, efforts are underway to explore the development of curriculum and resources to engage students as active participants in the process of creating journalism. While these efforts are more developed at the university level, programs are springing up at the high school level and even at lower levels.

But much less is known about how reading, viewing, and discussion of news and current events affect the development of students' knowledge and skills. Regular engagement with news and current events may support the development of learners' background knowledge. This engagement may help build connections between the classroom and the culture. This engagement may also help learners see how news and current events are constructed

by those with economic, political, and cultural interests at stake. This engagement may also help people appreciate how audiences understand and interpret messages differently based on their life experiences, prior knowledge, and attitudes.

Building a Community Education Movement

To support the development of digital and media literacy competencies for all Americans, we need a comprehensive *community education movement*. Local, regional, state, and national initiatives are essential. It will take time to build the infrastructure capacity and human resources necessary to bring digital and media literacy education to all citizens.

School librarians support digital and media literacy competencies by serving as leaders in their schools and communities, working as instructional partners to support colleagues, providing the services of an information specialist and program administrator to manage programs, as well as offering

direct instruction to learners. To achieve the buy-in necessary for success, initiatives must capitalize on existing local programs and resources, and enroll new stakeholders, including educational leaders, members of the business community, and members of professional associations who are motivated to develop and sustain programs. To accomplish this, I specifically call for the action steps described below.

Community Level Initiatives—We must garner support for community-level digital and media literacy initiatives, including promoting community partnerships and creating a Digital and Media Literacy (DML) Youth Corps to bring digital and media literacy to underserved communities and special populations via public libraries, museums, and other community centers.

Partnerships for Teacher Education—We must encourage the development of university-community partnerships for teacher

education so teachers can be better prepared to activate digital and media literacy competencies in a variety of educational contexts.

Research and Assessment—We must assess learning progression through online assessment tools and careful video documentation of best practices for digital and media literacy instructional strategies.

Stakeholder Engagement and Visibility—We must increase visibility for digital and media literacy education through public service announcements, entertainment-education initiatives, and an annual educator conference.

All across the nation and the world, school librarians and teachers are taking steps to ensure that digital and media literacy education offers the potential to maximize what we value most about the truly empowering characteristics of media and technology, while minimizing its negative dimensions. As the Knight Commission report Informing

Communities: Sustaining Democracy in the Digital Age explains, informed and engaged communities need citizens who appreciate the values of transparency, inclusion, participation, empowerment, and the common pursuit of the public interest.

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