

2015

Libraries and the New Digital Frontier: Support for Communities and Classrooms

Anne Burke

Memorial University, amburke@mun.ca

Janette Hughes

University of Ontario Institute of Technology, janette.hughes@uoit.ca

Renee Sanson

Memorial University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg>



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Burke, Anne; Hughes, Janette; and Sanson, Renee (2015) "Libraries and the New Digital Frontier: Support for Communities and Classrooms," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 27: Iss. 3, Article 13.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.7084>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

Libraries and the New Digital Frontier: Support for Communities and Classrooms

by **Anne Burke, PhD** (Associate Professor, Literacy & Education, Faculty of Education, Memorial University, Newfoundland, Canada) <amburke@mun.ca>

and **Janette Hughes, PhD** (Associate Professor, Literacy Education, Faculty of Education, University of Ontario Institute of Technology, Oshawa, Ontario, Canada) <Janette.Hughes@uoit.ca>

and **Renee Sanson** (Graduate student, Faculty of Education, Memorial University, Newfoundland, Canada)

The challenges that educators face using technology in the classroom are many and varied — from a lack of workplace professional development for learning new technologies to frequent insecurities around relying on technology to teach core curriculum ideas. In the media and from our research in digital reading and writing, we often hear how teachers are overwhelmed with teaching existing curricula, and are genuinely hard pressed to address all the necessary educational outcomes during the school year. The 21st century has brought with it the digitization of students' lives, and added pressures upon educators to address new technologies as a foundation in educational learning environments. According to a 2013 PEW Internet and American Life project survey, social media in particular is impacting the social lives of teenagers, influencing such important concepts as friendship and privacy. Often these applications and digital know-how are still evolving in practical application of teaching skills and assessment of such skills in school environments. Despite our observations of secondary classrooms where digital reading and writing are being quickly embraced by students and the school community, educators view these invitations for digital enhancement with hesitation, or see the learning curve for themselves as too broad and too time-consuming. However, there are others who strive to incorporate technology to develop digital skills in the classroom, and see the vital importance of developing such communication skills.

Readership itself is changing as digital natives can select from a range of print and electronic options for texts. The **Pew Research Center** reports that “almost half of readers under thirty read an eBook in the past year,” though traditional print books are still the favored form of text. (DeSilver, 2014.) The evolution of electronic devices and the magnitude of exposure to digital media in everyday lives have changed the meaning of literacy. “This generation lives in an environment where reading and writing, through digital media as well as traditional texts, are pervasive” (Consadine et al, 2009.) More important, institutions need to recognize the potential of, and place greater value on, the “literacies of the digital,” (Beetham, Littlejohn, and McGill, 2012, p.547) as well to provide future digital learning skills for their students. Although much of what we see in society is digitally adept youth, schools and universities are slow to leverage the use of such skills in coursework.

The new frontier of the digital age presents complexities for educators in consideration of how — and what — to teach, especially when one considers the digital tools that can be used today to enhance the learning experiences of students. The National Council of Teachers of English is looking beyond Powerpoint slides and scavenger hunts, examining the digital tools available to educators, focusing attention on investigating how children use these tools, and considering other critical and creative ways teachers might integrate this type of learning engagement with media in the classroom. Even with such support readily available, the slow uptake of such supports speaks to the unique challenges of digital tools.

The Challenge of Incorporating New Technologies

Literacy was once defined as the ability to read, write, and effectively communicate ideas. Teachers taught skills to students using paper, pencil, and textbooks — technologies of a different sort. Libraries and classrooms in particular were considered strongholds of these

traditional approaches to literacy. However, with the digital revolution well underway, educators and learners are striving to harness the rapidly changing technology of today to prepare students to be global contributors in society.

Communication and Information Technology has redefined how we read, write, and communicate. Forms of technology that are common in the lives of students today include search engines, Webpages, email, instant messaging, wiki, podcasts, eBooks, blogs, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram and so much more. As teachers, we must help prepare students to be able to “cope with the speed which technology makes things happen — information delivered in seconds sometimes requires immediate action” (Anstey & Bull, 2006). Learners are maturing with these digital tools, and these digital tools can enhance learning if approached the right way (Beetham et al., 2012).

Technology has the power to help us differentiate instruction in classrooms and offer more diverse opportunities for learning. Classroom participatory learning has reached outside the classroom door, encouraging students to collaborate not only amongst themselves, but also to share ideas and collaborate with people from all over the world. Some schools believe providing Internet access will automatically result in benefits in a school, but the bigger question is examining how these technologies are used, as well as the opportunities they offer (Buckingham, 2007). We see a different role and struggle for educators emerging alongside the digital revolution, as teaching methodologies and newer curricula are often more focused on inquiry-based learning, using digital technology, as opposed to earlier models of the dictation and rote memorization of a particular set of skills and knowledge. Giving teachers professional development through access to skilled technology support staff, staff collaboration, and peer-to-peer learning, is a needed action and good step forward, one which may be addressed through Libraries and technology support centers.

Libraries and Access to New Technologies

This type of public learning opportunity is not uncommon. The misconception that libraries are solely about print literacies is being challenged across North America. Libraries play a vital role in providing public access to digital technologies, and they offer unique initiatives in bridging the digital divide by presenting opportunities and options with technology to local patrons who sign up for free library services. Some of these options come with service fees, such as printing, faxing, scanning, or the use of digital cameras. However, many of the opportunities are free, such as access to computers and computer peripherals on site, and many libraries now offer free wireless access to the Internet. Libraries also extend access to digital resources such as eBooks, audiobooks, videos, games, and digital versions of newspapers and journals. These materials can be accessed remotely from home, work, or through the library workstations.

In North America, the Toronto, Calgary, and Vancouver public library systems all offer rudimentary computer training on basic skills development, digital design, social media, privacy, and online safety education. There are opportunities for patrons to learn about and troubleshoot personal mobile and tablet devices, in addition to computer basics. Most libraries teach Microsoft Office software use, and provide workshops for individuals to learn digital skills one-to-one or in group

continued on page 33



dynamics. Toronto and Calgary public libraries offer opportunities to learn computer programming and coding, such as Calgary's teen Coder Dojo, or Toronto's Digital Innovation Hub. Toronto libraries offer exposure to in-branch equipment (from Microsoft Surface and Google Chromebook to Raspberry Pis). Calgary's library promotes digital literacy through the Computer Buddies program, where teen volunteers help students in grades 1 to 6 safely use the Internet and Microsoft Office. In Washington D.C., the Digital Commons manager at the **Martin Luther King Jr. Library** is promoting "Libraries as Launch Pads" at a **South by Southwest** event, indicating how current some libraries are with technology and technology education. Libraries continue to give exposure to and education for the latest technologies such as 3-D printing.

Concerns regarding attendance in the libraries during the current "digital age" have proven completely unfounded. In fact, the vitality of many communities and development of digital skills are often dependent on libraries. In smaller Canadian communities and cities such as Cape Breton and Victoria, attendance in public libraries is visibly thriving. Libraries are regarded as social hubs, spaces where everyone, especially young people and seniors, are able to engage in local programs, meetings and interest groups. The president of the **Canadian Library Association**, **Valerie McKay**, reports to **CBC** that libraries continue to serve their patrons regularly. "**McKay** says libraries across the country constantly adapt to make sure they stay relevant to their communities. That includes lending out eBooks, use of the library as a community space, and teaching people how to better use computers." The Atlanta-Fulton libraries have been revitalized as a direct result of public support in 2014, and have been given much needed funding to expand their services. As a result, the libraries are getting a much needed facelift, including a partnership with "hoopla digital," which gives remote access to free movies, TV shows, and audiobooks. Toronto libraries are seeing almost three-quarters of citizens visiting their libraries in 2013. The modernization of the public library is focused less on the paper book circulation of the past and is more engaged in public services and information. Millions are being spent on building new libraries in capital cities such as Halifax and Calgary, showing how libraries are still valued for their public engagement. According to **Statistics Canada**, "A library is still a way to find information, but you can also make connections, attend events, hear music, access the Internet, and more. There are educational programs, art exhibits, reading clubs, talks, and social gatherings. You can find 3-D printers, toys, and havens for newcomers, new mothers, and the elderly. Not dissimilar to the U.S., Canada spends more than \$1 billion a year on libraries from public funds, at different levels of government, and has done so every year since 2008-09," and that shows the degree to which we still value these institutions.

What Can Public Libraries Do To Further Aid Educators and Communities?

In order to provide an adequate action plan to support educators with further professional development in using new digital tools, there are several possibilities to consider. Libraries could offer after-school digital programs or computer clubs. These sorts of digital peer communities can increase access to technologies for those who may need more professional digital development or those who have limited access to such a community within their school, or offer an opportunity to parents who may be not as comfortable with digital tools.

Libraries could promote digital citizen Websites for educator professional development. This would include an outline of rules and suggestions for ways teachers and parents could build their own online spaces. Additionally, video-conferencing, virtual lectures, or podcasts can be utilized as tools to give lessons on how to use digital media for the school to aid curriculum and to educate parents and students.

Libraries only stand to gain greater community connections through open communication around technology-driven initiatives. Libraries can achieve this by connecting with parents/guardians, students, and staff both online and in person. Our research showed innovative libraries are developing partnerships with community groups, local

government, telecommunication companies, local business, and media groups around models of access and education to bridge the digital divide in communities.

Consider if it is possible to use a virtual community to reach out to educators, teachers, and parents. Successful virtual communities are defined through user contributions, sustainability, and regular participation by members in that community, and a communal identity established by the frequent interaction and shared vision of members. Much of this could be a part of how the library may connect with school communities and educators.

Selznick (1996) described seven common bonds of a unidimensional community with multiple values:

- "Historicity — strands of shared history and culture.
- Identity — a loyalty and sense of belonging to their perception of the community.
- Mutuality — a supportive experience of interdependence and reciprocity.
- Plurality — created by the vitality of intermediate associations, such as families and common interest groups.
- Autonomy — the need to respect the rights of the individual within the community who contributes different views.
- Participation — in the social interconnections of the life of the community.
- Integration — of all the above elements with enough coherence to provide the basis for a common life and understanding of their community" (p.27).

A library's ability to nurture these bonds is essential to the development of a thriving digital community. In this manner, libraries can support teachers, parents, and students in the changing digital frontier. The library's contribution to developing screen or Web literacy is well illustrated in many forward thinking institutions identified above. As teachers struggle with the change of youth appetites for particular digital texts such as gaming and various apps, libraries become an important support for teachers to make suggestions as to what digital texts and applications could be useful for young adults learning and developing literacy skills. Libraries are an important productive space to suggest ways to build and nurture a digital community of learners.

References

- Albers, P., McMunn Dooley, C., Seely Flint, A., Holbrook, T., and May, L.** (2011). The digital frontier in early childhood education. *Language Arts*, 89(2), 83-85.
- Anstey, M. and Bull, G.** (2006). *Defining multiliteracies. Teaching and learning multiliteracies: Changing times, changing literacies.* Newark, DE: Australian Literacy Educators Association. p. 19-54.
- Beetham, H., Littlejohn, A., and McGill, L.** (2012). Learning at the digital frontier: a review of digital literacies in theory and practice. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, 28(6), 547-556.
- Buckingham, D.** (2007). Media education goes digital: an introduction. *Learning, Media, and Technology*, 32(2), 111-119.
- Burke, D.,** (March 27, 2015) Cape Breton libraries growing in popularity, despite digital age. *CBC News Nova Scotia*. Retrieved on April 4, 2015 from www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/cape-breton-libraries-growing-in-popularity-despite-digital-age-1.3011872.
- Considine, D., Horton, J., and Moorman, G.** (2009). Teaching and Reading the Millennial Generation Through Media Literacy. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 52(6), 471-481.
- Desilver, D.** (21 January 2014). Overall book readership stable, but e-books becoming more popular. *FactTank news in the numbers.* Pew Research Center. Retrieved on 25 April 2014 from <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/01/21/overall-book-readership-stable-but-e-books-becoming-more-popular/>.
- Donachie, M.** (December 9, 2014) More than just books why libraries matter in Canada. *Metro News*. Retrieved on April 4, 2015 from <http://metronews.ca/voices/opinion/1235434/more-than-just-books-why-libraries-matter-in-canada/>.
- Holbrook, T. and Hundley, M.** (2013). Set in Stone or Set in Motion? Multimodal and Digital Writing With Preservice English Teachers. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 56(6), 500-509. 🌱