DIGITAL LITERACIES AND EDUCATION IN KASHMIR ARE POLES APART- REASONS AND REMEDIES

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ABSTRACT

Digital literacy or digital literacies, as some call it, has become the leading 21st century pedagogical consideration for education all over the world. It is not about teaching technology, but it is about teaching through technology. In fact it is some sort of vertical movement from Computer literacy to usage of computer literacy for data collection, critical data analysis and then using this data for societal good.

Purpose: *The purpose of this document is to raise awareness of the importance of digital literacies within the education framework in Kashmir. The purpose of this paper is to help educators make the shift from traditional teaching and a traditional pedagogical approach to a 21st century learning environment (content learning). Objective is to support and guide each teacher to make that shift. Government will be persuaded for the inclusion of Digital Literacies in the curriculum.*

Keywords: Computer Literacy, Digital Literacy, Baby Boomers, Gen Z, Facebook, Social Media.

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1. INTRODUCTION

“Digital literacies are the capabilities to gather, critically analyze, and effectively use digital data in a digital society”. Or to put in simple words “Digital literacy is literacy via technology.” However things are not that simple since technology is continuously changing the environment we grew up in.

The term ‘digital literacy’ was coined in 1997 by Paul Gilster who defined it as “the ability to both understand and use digitized information” (Gilster 1997, 2). The concept, which had been discussed widely throughout the 1990s, was built upon the discourses of visual literacy (using non-textual symbols and images to make sense of knowledge); technological literacy (the ability to use a particular technology or technologies); computer literacy (which

had developed in the 1980s as a response to the launch of personal computers and which described the computer as a means to achieving a specified outcome); and information literacy (finding, evaluating, using and sharing information) (Belshaw 2012).

Digital culture gathered momentum in 21st century with the idea of participative digital technologies reaching out to the maximum.

Figure 1. Adapted from Belshaw (2011), Digital Canada 156, Futurelab and European Framework for Digital Literacy

Some people received this technology late in their lives while as some are born just before the onset of the technology and are, hence, more comfortable with it than their elders. They think differently of this old generation. This generation gap with regard to technological know-how is differentiated by the terms like Baby Boomers and Gen Z for old and new ones respectively. This Gen Z has thus posed a great challenge for educators as their preferences are quite different. If we consider the literacy as a means of sharing of meaning through language, then digital literacy can be traced back to 1000-1200BC. It is only very late when literacy was refined to reading and writing. The portable camera brought about the ease of producing and distributing images - so educators introduced the concept of *visual literacy*, highlighting the importance of how to look at images, and understand the way images communicate and carry meaning. The storing of data and, hence, the emergence of databases introduced a new wave of powerful technologies to shape literacy. These technologies needed a new set of skills, competencies and strategies for searching, finding and evaluating information - creating *information literacy*. Similarly *Media literacy* followed shortly with hundreds of TV channels to choose from. The microprocessor on our desks created the need for an ICT-literate generation and an entirely new set of technical skills to maximise the potential of the technology. And finally, at-least till now, digital literacy is the emerging concept which in some sectors became a contested idea. However, since the seminal work of Paul Gilster, *Definitions of Digital Literacy*, there has been a growing consensus about the term digital literacy. What does it mean to be literate today? It is an appreciation of various contexts. In traditional literacy everything was straight forward where we were very clear and explicit. Today we face a situation where we continually face a merger of various cultures based not only on geographic distances but also on psychological, political and experiential differences. So it is a much more complex endeavour to understand what literacy is.

2. IMPORTANCE

It has been said that “getting information off the Internet is like taking a tumbler of water from an ocean”. With the ever growing Internet approaching 1 trillion pages, that statement has never been truer. Every day, every minute, more information is added to the Internet, with no sign of slowing down. Being digitally literate means being able to sift through so much information, being able to understand a message and to communicate it effectively to others in different formats. It means creating, collaborating, communicating, working ethically and understanding when, if and how, technology should be used to reach efficiently an objective.

Digital literacy, hence, involves the critical use of technology. It involves the awareness of and critical analysis of agendas and possible dangers with which technology bombards our daily lives. It involves educating our students to move from a passive consumer of information to an active producer both as an individual and as part of a community. The British Computer Society took a slightly different tack to how digital was to be understood with regard to the implications of technology for an individual's life in society. They argue that word critical is extremely important and that it is not just accepting these things but the user must have an understanding of how a document has been made. Finding things on the Internet matters but an awareness of how a search engine like Google puts those results into order and where Google's business model is is an understanding of the back story to some of those results. It is part of what we want with the inception of Digital literacy. Digital literacy, however, has its negative uses as well. Recent allegations of the US on Russia for meddling in their elections signals of a great danger. We are in a state of Cyber war. Europe has been alleging Russia for interferences for more than a decade now. Crimea to Syria, it is Digital...you know. So, we need to educate our learners on this front as well. They are to be made ethically responsible citizen.

3. ROLE IN EDUCATION

Twenty years ago being literate meant being able to read and write. Richard Lanham (1995, p. 198) claims that "literacy" has extended its reach from meaning "the ability to read and write" to now meaning "the ability to understand information however presented." Our focus today is not to prepare our students for this new meaning of literacy in mind but also for the future with a shift from consumption to production. The Internet, the World Wide Web, Smartphone, Face book are very recent terms when compared to what has been going on in schools these past 20 years. We are not just consuming what is happening on the web and digital spaces but we are also producing, which requires a sharper level of complexity. So literacy today means much more than the reading of text, which is its original meaning. If you could write your name and you could consume, read directions and read books, you could make sense of the world. But today the production part is as important if not more than the consumption part. Reading is changing as well. Online reading is different from reading from a book, but the material that we are reading is also changing. The infusion of the visual into texts gives a new dimension to literacy. Literacy needs to encompass understanding and interpretation of the visual symbols of all kinds and images.

They say that digital literacy is really about basic computer skills, the ECDL type of syllabus, the ability to use standard Office packages, to be able to use the Internet, and the sort of things that any secondary school teacher ought to assume that any child in their class is capable of doing. Thus by this impression student of lower classes are or must be capable of doing all this stuff. There is not much agreement around this definition although you might think that it is a perfectly sensible and valid one. This definition is like saying that literacy is merely the ability to read and write and that of course is a part of literacy but our understanding of literacy is much more. It is about the understanding of meaning and the conveyance of meaning rather than simply reading and writing skill on their own.

"Digital literacy refers to the more subtle and situated practices associated with being able to create, understand and communicate meaning and knowledge in a world in which these processes are increasingly mediated via digital technologies." (Futurelab, 2010)

More than 70% economy of developed or developing nations is either based on or supported by Information technology. Markets are run by Digital technology. Smart things have become part of our daily lives. In India, Government has understood the importance of this technology and rightfully takes necessary steps in this direction. From e-governance to

M-governance. Everything is App driven. Jobs are open in this area. Multinational companies need people who are digitally literate.

Our learners need to acquire digital literacy skills as without any form of formal guidance they are likely to remain uninformed and uncritical users of ICT. A couple of visits to Ask.fm are enough to raise concerns about a generation that is not fully digitally literate, yet deeply immersed in cyberspace.

In order to be literate in today's media-rich environments, our youth need to develop knowledge, values and a whole range of critical thinking, communication and information management skills and competencies for the digital age. If our young generation lacks digital competencies, they risk being disenfranchised when it comes to government services, employment opportunities and democratic participation. So, we cannot afford keeping our future generation away from this ever growing Future.

4. SCENARIO OF KASHMIR

In Kashmir this Gen Z, a computer savvy, uses Smart-phones to its good potential, if not to the maximum. They are fully immersed in the technology at the own. They are quite comfortable with the use of information, in any way, available on the Internet. They use social media, use blogs to share their understanding of the things around, and know the use of graphics to a larger extent. Development of amusing videos is a trend here and everybody knows it- knows the creator group. In short the youth deserves teaching-learning in a digital way. But unfortunately, the curriculum designer, the policy makers, the administrators and to some extent the teachers seem to be unaware of this need of them, if not to say are repulsive to this new way of sharing information with our students. The reasons may be many but they most evident among them is the gap between Baby Boomers and Gen Z. We cannot force them not to progress, not to move with other digital literate societies. They are to be made producers rather than consumers of information. Baring a few senior secondary schools in Kashmir, none has a computer. Effort to make students in school education sector even computer literate, leaving aside what is trending-digital literacy, seems to be a distant dream. Asking for Internet connectivity to Schools/Secondary Schools/Senior secondary schools in Kashmir will be like asking for their throne. Internet remains suspended off and on and thereby leaving these self-learning digital learners in lurch. Even Higher education here cannot be called digital education providers as these colleges provide computer literacy, which is though a pre-requisite for digital literacy, to a selected group only. It is not been made mandatory for all the students neither is it been made a part of the curriculum of students pursuing subjects other than computers.

5. REASONS

First and foremost reason, I believe, is the mind-set of all the stake holders. The government seems not to have any priority for education except for using students for chanting slogans, making an audience for politicians and using teachers for electioneering process. The other reasons are the generation gap between Baby Boomers and Gen Z. Yet another reason can be the teachers being repulsive to this new technology. Need for academic programme for teachers to help them keep abreast the trending technologies that would remove their fear for such technologies. Other reasons can include faulty curriculum that lacks the inclusion of such technologies as a mandatory part for all the students across the faculties.

6. REMEDIES

It is believed that changing the way we teach and understanding how we learn in a technology driven world requires a different mind-set, in and beyond the classroom. Thus the first step is

to help all educators to accept that there is a need for change because the world has changed drastically and is continuously changing at an alarming rate. The second step is to continue to help educators understand that technology which can in turn help them achieve easily the heights that are unreachable without digital tools. Awareness programme for the purpose need to be thickly organized.

Our state produces highest percentage of Graduates and Postgraduates. And unfortunately these qualified youth find themselves nothing to earn at. Unemployment is at its peak. Private sector is nowhere in the state- particularly in Kashmir. So, only way forward is that the government is made to understand Digital Literacy as a solution to this unemployment so it gets due attention at the level of policy makers.

7. CONCLUSION

Digital Literacy is present and it governs global economies. Societies that understood its importance have moved forward and the ones that are to accept it as magic stick are lagging behind. In Kashmir-considering the unemployment- I see a strong push of this technology that we will be forced to adapt to it. Our youth is already immersed in cyber technologies so, only thing they need is to channelize their zeal and interests. Encourage them for being cyber savvy but with a word of caution though. Government needs to be persuaded for the inclusion of digital literacy in curriculum as is been done for the inclusion of regional language even though those steps, I believe, are going to pay nothing. I pledge to work tirelessly for the purpose with a missionary zeal.

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