

Educating Digital Citizens Through Curricular Incorporation: A South African Solution to Information Poverty

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ABSTRACT

With the increased focus on e-education and closing the digital divide through access to ICT's in South Africa, foundation and secondary school curricula are increasingly becoming the location for ICT integration. There is however no overt focus on introducing digital wellness and digital citizenship education information into the curriculum, leaving students vulnerable in terms of information seeking, use, and production even with infrastructure access being available. This treats the problem of the digital divide in South Africa as a purely access-based issue, ignoring the influence of information poverty and digital citizenship on the digital divide. Through examining the existing curriculum this article attempts to suggest a possible integration of these topics within the existing curricular structure.

KEYWORDS

Curriculum Reform, Digital Citizenship, Digital Divide, E-Education, ICT Education, Information Poverty, IT Education, South Africa

1. INTRODUCTION

Living in a globalized community means the innovative dynamics of technology are contributing factors to easing the process of connecting and communicating with one another across the world regardless of our geographic locations. However, as with all phenomena, there exist both positive and negative consequences to the digital era, consequences that especially affect the insufficiently digitally literate South African youth, defined by the StatsSA survey organization as aged 15 to 35, which makes up about 36.2% of the entire country's population (StatsSA, 2017). In face of the ever-increasing social network and media platforms, the youth of South Africa, if not sufficiently literate, are confronted with the problem of not knowing how to appropriately conduct themselves online, including the inability to ensure their private information is protected as well as identifying and practicing ethical and unethical behaviour.

The students enrolled in the South African educational system leave the high school system (either by matriculating after the 12th year or voluntarily leaving upon completing the 9th year) not digitally literate, as found by Anthony (Daniels, 2017). Studies of the matriculated students entering the higher education field through university entrance exams have been conducted since 2008, and compared to 2012 results of the same metric measuring the effectiveness of digital literacy education at school level (Glenda Barlow-Jones & Westhuizen, 2013). While some improvement of digital literacy was noted, there was still a significant amount of illiteracy when elements of digital literacy were considered, specifically access and internet usage (Glenda Barlow-Jones & Westhuizen, 2013).

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Kajee and Balfour (2011) specifically relate the lack of digital literacy in their surveyed higher education students to economic disadvantage and lack of infrastructure and training at school level due to historical inequalities in the school system.

The main issue identified in South Africa is the fact that, even with the presence of digital technologies and access to the internet, South Africans, more especially the youth, are not aware of digital codes that dictate how they should conduct themselves when partaking in online activities. In fact, it is not uncommon for a South African 12-year-old to own an internet-capable mobile device that allows them to access all kinds of websites and digital information. A report on South African children and their use of media reports that the average age a child first uses the internet is at 11.7-years old (Burton, Leoschut, & Phyfer, 2016, p. 14). And although e-Education is fast becoming a reality in South Africa where government is encouraging online activity in schools, the issue is the ethical online behaviour and cybersafety concerns surrounding the youth using technology, seeing that government is not as open about implementing initiatives to digitally train learners as they are about improving technology access. Therefore, the problem lies in this question: how can strategies, deployed by the South African government, assist in fostering Digital Citizenship awareness amongst the youth of the country?

2. BACKGROUND

Computer literacy, as defined by the Gauteng Department of Education Gauteng Department of Education (2011, p. 4) refers to the level of comfort at which someone has when using computer programmes and technology itself. This kind of literacy is taught in some schools as an elective subject, and in most of the cases, the curriculum of the subject is limited to just that: learning how to use PCs and basic applications such as Microsoft Word. This is not a module required by the Department of Education for graduation and as such does not have to be offered by any schools, it thus does not provide a guaranteed solution to the problem of the digital divide through information poverty based on education and ability. Historically, as found by Kajee and Balfour (2011) it is the more privileged schools that have and require participation in Information Literacy programmes, this only serves to widen the digital divide in South Africa, already problematic due to historical inequalities as evidenced by the population income ratio including more traditionally advantaged people in the higher income bracket. So, by possessing basic computer skills and the said computer literacy, individuals only know ‘how to use a computer’ instead of knowing ‘how to use a computer *appropriately*’ where by being equipped with the latter kind of information, they will be able to, for instance, make better judgements on the content they come across, which will allow them to share their opinions and thus become participating citizens of the digital society at large. This can be done through the promotion of the laws and standards that exist concerning the acceptable use of ICTs, how users can protect themselves from the dangers of the internet (e.g. cyberbullying, phishing, identity theft, etc.), as well as the responsibilities that they have when it comes to them ensuring clean digital identities online.

Information poverty as an aspect of the digital divide is an increasing problem in South Africa as increased access to ICT technologies is developed. While developed, economically sound countries with developed education and social systems could guarantee fair and equal information access in spite of location, education, historical inequality or socio-economic position, South Africa is not yet in a position to do so (Ocholla, 2013, p. 26). Information poverty cannot be identified as the simple lack of access to information, but must be seen as a broader problem involving multiple factors that influence how information is accessed and used. Britz (2013, p. 78) suggest that the qualitative approach to defining information poverty includes the following factors:

- How people value and react to information
- Understanding information needs and how to satisfy them

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