


Chapter 5

Digital Citizenship in Virtual Environments

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ABSTRACT

Virtual environments provide collaborative learning opportunities beyond physical walls and without time constraints. Learners connect across the planet in real time. The virtual representation of self requires understanding of personal responsibility for digital citizenship and information literacy. Both presentation of self and evaluation of content in all formats are new challenges for learners of all ages, including the youngest students born into an age of networked sharing and connecting. Virtual learning environments may transform education and certainly provide both advantages and disadvantages for educators and learners. Understanding personal responsibility for digital citizenship is imperative to best practices of education in virtual spaces. This chapter focuses on digital citizenship and information literacy in virtual worlds, virtual reality, and immersive learning environments.

INTRODUCTION

Learning in the 21st century has radically changed due to the toppling of the information hierarchy leading to a critical need for digital citizenship in participatory culture. We no longer live in an era of linear acquisition of knowledge by the individual with traditional publishing sources housed in libraries and carefully selected by “gatekeepers” at the top of the hierarchy. Participatory culture, a world where individuals have instant access to information on mobile devices and a vast array of content creation and curation applications, has allowed crowdsourced and user-generated content to overtake traditional sources in only a few years. In order to “participate” in participatory culture, through online tools and networks, digital citizenship has become critical. Without an understanding of the evaluation of information in the new gatekeeper-free era, an individual can be lost in an overwhelming flood of information. This chapter focuses on challenges presented by the change from a hierarchy of knowledge acquisition

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to one of global instant access and a critical need for personal responsibility for learning. This awareness of digital citizenship is imperative to the future of learning both for the individual and for our society.

An example of participatory culture is Wikipedia, the largest encyclopedia in the world created by users across the globe which began with popular culture but (Joseph Deodato believes) is not fully embraced by politics and education. Deodato says, “However, the participatory culture of the Web, as constructed by online forums, blogs, social networks, and massively multiplayer games, empower users by offering opportunities to participate, create, interact, and engage in decision-making” (Deodato, 2014, p. 746). A new regime of collaboratively edited open content, according to Deodato, challenges traditional conceptions of knowledge and expertise covering a wide range of specialized and traditionally marginalized topics. The ability to participate in networked culture presents a need for responsible behavior.

Today, no matter which devices or technology applications we use, each one of us lives and learns in a virtual world more often than in a physical one. The walls of physical classrooms have been lifted and learners can communicate through social media, Skype, or numerous live online formats. The shift to learning in a virtual world has powerful advantages but also has disadvantages and obstacles both obvious and hidden. Awareness of the advantages and disadvantages of virtual learning is part of digital citizenship. Through exploring and reflecting on how literacy and learning have rapidly changed, the need for digital citizenship becomes clear for ourselves and for learners of the future. Whether or not one experiences global digital participatory culture with an avatar in a simulated environment, we all live in a virtual world with mobile devices at our fingertips taking us to places beyond our physical bodies. This chapter focuses on the need for digital citizenship with a focus on virtual environments for learning.

BACKGROUND OF VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENTS IN PARTICIPATORY CULTURE

Participatory culture can be defined as a culture in which private persons (the public) do not act as consumers only, but also as contributors or producers. “The term is most often applied to the production or creation of some type of published media” (Wikipedia, 2019). Learners in today’s classroom live in global digital participatory culture and are digital citizens as well as citizens of a physical community and they participate as *prosumers* (a term first used by Alvin Toffler)- both consumers and producers of media (Toffler, 1980). Toffler, a futurist, predicted the movement toward producing media decades ago.

Schools and libraries are embracing participatory culture and the Web 2.0 tools that arose at the turn of the 21st century, such as image and video creation, mash-ups and curation tools. Librarians like Buffy Hamilton at Creekview High School in Georgia, believe strongly in participatory culture to promote inquiry-based collaborative learning through blogs, wikis, and building virtual learning portfolios. Hamilton says, “The participatory culture is also conducive to helping students create personal learning networks and environments to cultivate resources for accessing, evaluating, and sharing information locally and with the world” (Hamilton, 2011, p. 41). This move toward participatory culture has created a need for PLNs, Personal (or Professional) Learning Networks to learn and discover trends and changes because it is difficult, perhaps impossible, to keep up with the exponential growth and change of computer technology. A PLN can be considered as a personally curated network of individuals to share learning opportunities, particularly in online platforms.

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