Journal of Media Literacy Education Pre-Prints

July 2021

Bringing Digital Well-Being into the Heart of Digital Media Literacies

Julia Feerrar
Virginia Tech, USA, feerrar@vt.edu

Bringing Digital Well-Being into the Heart of Digital Media Literacies

Abstract

The complexities of our digital media landscape present challenges that often strain the physical, emotional, and social well-being of learners and educators alike. Given these challenges, this essay makes a case for incorporating digital well-being into digital and media literacy curricula and pedagogy. For the author, a focus on digital well-being, or the capacity to pursue health, safety, and happiness online, has sparked a shift in pedagogical values and goals. Following a discussion of the nature of digital well-being, the author charts this shift through an example lesson about online identity. Bringing digital well-being into the heart of digital media literacies means reconsidering both the 'what' and 'how' of our teaching.

Living, learning, and working within the complexities of our information and media ecosystem is messy and often challenging. We face disinformation, harassment and bullying, attacks on our privacy and security, distractions and drains on our time, as well as complex choices about how to show up and interact with others in digital spaces. In the midst of a global pandemic, in which we rely on digital media in expanded ways, these challenges are all the more timely. And yet, we know that online communities and digital media creation can have incredible power for learners and educators alike. Social media platforms and mobile devices can connect us with friends, family, and colleagues around the world. Online communities for shared interests and experiences foster a sense of belonging among their participants. For many of us, an incredible range of information is just a Google or library database search away. And, opportunities to create and share make authorship increasingly accessible. How do we amplify the connective power of digital media and contend with some of its challenges? How can we help learners to make the most of their experiences with digital media? I see these as central questions for digital media literacy education. And yet, in our efforts to minimize risk and set students on the right path, I worry that we as educators sometimes oversimplify and misrepresent the challenges and nuances of our digital world.

When I first began teaching as a librarian-in-training and then as a new academic librarian, I often felt that my goal was to make things easier for the undergraduate students I worked with. As an instruction librarian working primarily with first-year undergraduate students, I wanted to simplify processes, give clear answers, and help them ease into the challenges of college-level research and writing. And yet as I have taught more, as I have learned from the growing range of students I work with, as my role has expanded to include leading digital literacy initiatives at my library, and as I have joined interdisciplinary conversations around literacies with other educators, I have seen the limitations of this goal. Over time, I have realized that by attempting to clarify and simplify, I was often mischaracterizing the realities of our complex information and media landscape and missing out on some of the richness of engaging with learners as whole people. I see similar concerns echoed in Michelle Ciccone's recent essay on digital citizenship (2020). Ciccone notes that conversations around digital citizenship "tend to focus almost exclusively on establishing appropriate user behavior," which does not contend with the actual challenges of participating in online spaces (2020). And further, that digital citizenship education is often oversimplified to a moralized list of "dos and don'ts" that are focused on etiquette, "stranger danger," and the need to be kind online (Ciccone, 2020). As Ciccone contends, we need to move away from a moral take on digital citizenship and towards an ethical and ecologically-minded one that encourages learners to consider not only their own actions, but also the wider workings of our environment.

In my own work, I have found the concept of digital well-being to be a powerful reframing of digital citizenship-related concepts, such as online presence, privacy, community participation, and critically evaluating information. Rather than charting a right and wrong way to engage online, digital well-being recognizes the nuance of individual experience and a range of possible choices. By bringing well-being into the heart of digital media literacies, we recognize that when learners explore, evaluate, create, and take action, they are doing so from *who* and *how* they are. Following a discussion of digital well-being definitions, this essay will outline the evolution of my teaching with well-being in mind, focusing on an example lesson about online identity. An emphasis on questions of identity and well-being have reframed how I understand both my role as an educator and the concepts, skills, and attitudes I focus on in the classroom. And ultimately, digital well-being is also an important aspect of my approach to leading a team.

What is digital well-being?

Digital well-being is the capacity to pursue health, safety, and happiness with regard to multiple aspects of our digital lives. At its core, digital well-being is about *who* we are and *how* we are online or in digitally-mediated spaces. Media literacy practitioners and scholars may be familiar with approaching these *who* and *how* questions through a variety or theoretical perspectives, including through paradigms of participatory culture (Jenkins et al., 2016) or literacy as a social practice (Freire & Macedo, 1987). However, my first interaction with the concept of digital well-being was through the JISC Digital Capabilities Framework, which includes Identity and Wellbeing as one of six elements of capability (JISC, 2015). JISC's definition, developed by Helen Beetham, focuses on "the capacity to look after personal health, safety, relationships and work-life balance in digital settings" (Beetham 2016; JISC, 2015). More recently, the Council of Europe has included Wellbeing Online as one area of digital citizenship (2019). In their model, Wellbeing Online encompasses ethics and empathy, health and well-being, and online presence and communications (2019, p. 13-14).

Notably, over the last several years large tech companies including Apple and Google have launched features in the name of digital well-being. Users of Apple and Android smartphones, for example, can access applications and settings that allow them to review and manage their screen time. While these tools offer some important reflective opportunities, I want to emphasize that screen time management is just one aspect of digital well-being and limiting screen time may not be the answer for enhancing well-being in every case. The exact nature of digital well-being practices can vary among individuals, based on personal goals and needs as well as sociocultural context (Gui et al., 2017). In other words, there is no single right way to be "digitally well," just as broader notions of personal well-being differ across individuals and cultural expectations.

We can think about digital well-being as encompassing physical, emotional, and social dimensions of wellness (Beetham, 2016; Gui et al., 2017). On a physical level, eye strain, carpal tunnel syndrome, and neck pain are common issues associated with digital technology. These kinds of well-being challenges may have fairly straightforward behavioral or technology-based solutions, such as adjusting blue light screen settings, obtaining ergonomic supports, or taking more frequent breaks from technology use. Well-being gets more complex when we consider emotional and mental health factors. From an emotional perspective, digital well-

being includes setting boundaries for time and other elements, caring for interpersonal relationships, cultivating a sense of belonging online, and reflecting on the health of the media we both consume and create.

Socially, digital well-being turns toward the relationship between the individual and community (Gui et al., 2017, p. 157). Those pursuing digital-wellbeing work to act safely and responsibly, to use digital media to take civic action, to be ethical and critical participants online, and to care for both the human and natural environment (Beetham, 2016; JISC, 2015; Nansen et al., 2012). They also recognize the limitations of their own individual control over some of the factors that may threaten digital well-being. For example, while an individual can work to critically evaluate the media they interact with, the power to solve complex challenges around disinformation lies beyond individual choice. Understanding the larger systems and power dynamics at play in our media ecosystem, such as personalized search results and ad revenue, are also important social aspects of digital well-being. Ultimately, questions of equity, ethics, and values are vital to this understanding (Chambers & Sandford, 2019). Education that is oriented around digital well-being and "values literacy" supports students in engaging ethically and empathically in digital spaces (Chambers & Sandford, 2019, p. 930).

Digital well-being and pedagogy

After I took on a new role leading digital literacy initiatives at my institution in 2017, digital well-being emerged as a gap in our current offerings. Prioritizing digital well-being has influenced the concepts and skills I tend to focus on in the classroom, but has also extended beyond specific goals for the learners I interact with. More broadly, digital well-being is an approach that has shifted my thinking over time and shaped the values and aspirations of my teaching.

When I first began to intentionally develop a series of workshops related to digital well-being for undergraduate students, online presence was one of the topics that I was most eager to address. Addressing the nuances in how we represent ourselves online (or how we may be represented outside of our control) felt core to digital well-being for me from the start. As I started to plan, I felt a tension between how I had interacted with ideas around online presence in the past, and the well-being approach I wanted to take. Drawing on previous reading, professional development, and my own experiences with online presence, I felt an impulse to provide students with clear "do's and don'ts" for their online presence. I wanted to

give clear strategies and takeaways for something that I knew could be challenging. Yet, in these efforts to clarify and simplify, I felt how easy it was to begin to slip into a punitive take on online presence: to warn students about what not to do and to assume that my advice would apply broadly to any student. In doing so, I would be coming to digital media literacy from a place of fear. Instead, I wanted my teaching to reflect the nuance and complexity of being a person online. I wanted to explore hope and possibility over do's and don'ts. I hoped students would come away with a better understanding of their options, with flexibility to determine how those options could work for them.

Since that first workshop, I have taught many iterations of online presence lessons, including for undergraduate natural resources majors, graduate teaching assistants, undergraduate peer wellness educators, and for drop-in workshops open to the university community. While I still certainly wrestle with these impulses to simplify, clarify, and provide one right way, well-being has led me to other guiding priorities. Table 1 summarizes this shift in my thinking.

Table 1. *A Shift Towards Teaching with Well-Being in Mind*

Before a Well-Being Lens	With a Well-Being Lens
Starting from simplicity and clarity	Starting from complexity and curiosity
Emphasis on what not to do	Emphasis on hope and possibility
Focus on one right way	Focus on multiple options and choices, depending on goals and context
Consideration of ethics and equity, sometimes as an afterthought	Consideration of ethics and equity as integral and vital

With these guiding principles in mind, I will now outline how I work to approach teaching about online presence from a well-being lens.

Curiosity and reflection: I start most online presence workshops with an activity in which students search for their name in a search engine of choice. This sets the stage for getting curious about and exploring their current online presence. I encourage students to reflect on how this current presence aligns with their goals. Do you want to be off the grid? Are you hoping to engage with a certain field?

Would you like to see examples of your work publicly available? A major strength of this activity is that it starts us off with an acknowledgement that each individual has their own presence and may have vastly differing goals for what that looks like.

Learners as whole people: This exploratory searching activity also helps me to start from an awareness of learners as whole people with differing needs, goals, experiences, and identities. What are your personal goals and motivations? What are you looking for from online communities? What experiences and dimensions of identity do you bring to your digital life? How do you show up to others, purposefully or not? These are questions with answers that differ widely among the students I work with and I try to build in time to open the floor to their responses.

Options and decisions: After a discussion of students' current online presence and future goals, I usually move into discussing more specific strategies for either expanding or narrowing an online presence, recognizing multiple reasons for moving in either direction. In presenting these strategies, I emphasize multiple options and decision points. For example, there are many different approaches to sharing images of yourself online. When selecting a profile picture for a new account, you might use a professional headshot, an informal snapshot, a cartoon avatar, or a photo that represents one of your interests instead of your face. You may take different approaches to images on different platforms or try to use the same photo across all aspects of your presence. And any of these choices are valid. From a wellness perspective, there is no one right way to manage an online presence and the approaches an individual takes will depend on their goals and experiences. While this approach may leave some students wishing for more explicit direction, I think it is important to give students opportunities to reflect on the intersection of their own choices and goals, and to help them identify options for setting boundaries for themselves or even with their imagined audience.

Hope and possibility: The fact that potential employers will Google your name when you apply for a job often comes up during the workshops I teach. When it does, I try to reframe the conversation from "employers will Google you, so watch out!" to "employers will Google you, so how can you use that to your advantage to tell your story?" And further, what are some opportunities to think about the value of online presence beyond employability? Discussions around privacy, digital footprint, and the health of our information environments can get scary and stressful quickly. While I think it is vital to acknowledge the very real

challenges of our digital landscape, I try to resist answering these challenges from a place of fear or with a punitive "what not to do" approach.

Ethics and equity: Some of the questions I am still wrestling with when it comes to teaching about online presence, and digital well-being as a whole, are questions of ethics and equity. Getting really clear about who our students are includes recognizing that their experiences, both online and offline, may differ based on dimensions of their identities. Negative experiences online, such as bullying and harassment, are interrelated with offline experiences and are differentiated across gender, socioeconomic status, and race (Ito et al., 2020, p. 4). What if Googling themselves might be a very negative experience for students? How can I facilitate conversations about online identity and "professionalism," while questioning cultural norms and recognizing how problematic they can be? How can I continue to dig into the nuance of different identities and experiences in what often ends up being a short class period? While I do not have clear answers to these questions, I do think I have an ethical responsibility to continue to explore them and to encourage students to recognize their varying social responsibilities as both authors and audience of and for online presence.

Digital well-being as a team approach

In addition to shaping my own pedagogical values, digital well-being has served as a guiding focus for my leadership. Over the last few years, I have been leading a growing team of library faculty and staff that focuses on digital literacies. With so many opportunities to collaborate and build learning opportunities with others, it is sometimes overwhelming to chart our course as a team. Seeing digital well-being as a potential gap in current offerings within our library and across our campus, as well as a core element to my own sense of purpose, I set digital well-being as a focus for our work together.

The major thrust of our collaborative work has involved building out a digital well-being curriculum. We are iteratively developing lesson plans, sometimes for an open audience of anyone who wants to show up, but most often for a specific group of undergraduate or graduate students. These partners include a variety of student groups, courses, and other campus collaborators, including first-year experience courses, undergraduate living-learning communities, and our student success center. The topics we have focused on include an introduction to digital self-care and managing the health of our online spaces and communities,

online identity and managing an online presence, fact-checking, and decluttering digital files. We have also begun to develop outreach and student engagement opportunities around these topics and are looking towards developing more online learning resources.

Digital well-being has also opened up opportunities for us to collaborate with new partners. For example, over the last two years we have begun to collaborate with our campus wellness unit. Thus far, this collaboration has included cross-promoting workshops, cross training for student workers, and a few collaborative outreach events. While the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted many of the activities involved in this partnership, I am excited that a focus on digital well-being helped us to find a partner we may not have recognized previously. I look forward to returning to many of these activities in the future.

In addition to providing a more focused set of teaching and learning goals, and an avenue for partnership, digital well-being has provided my team with shared language to discuss pedagogical values and aspirations. As we puzzle over the best way to explain a concept or facilitate an activity, we often come back to considering the humanity of the students we work with, reflecting on questions of ethics and equity, and sharing our own authentic experiences with digital life. From my perspective, this has been grounding for the challenging work of collaborative teaching. It has also continued to remind us of the ways in which we are often co-learning with our students on these topics. We share many of the same digital life challenges and do not always make choices that support our own wellness, even when we are aware of other options. While this can be an uncomfortable place to be as an educator, I think it is all the more important to be authentic about these challenges where we can.

If you are interested in exploring digital well-being, on your own or with your teaching team, here are some questions to consider:

- What are the biggest challenges or stressors you see in your community when it comes to different aspects of digital life? What are the biggest challenges or stressors you feel for yourself?
- What could it look like to emphasize hope and possibility over fear when it comes to digital media?
- How can you provide learners with multiple options when engaging in digital spaces or projects?

- How might the learners you interact with experience digital spaces differently, as related to their own identities? How could you take those differences into consideration when planning a lesson?

Conclusion

In this essay, I have outlined my journey in reframing my teaching through a well-being lens and emphasizing well-being in my leadership practices. For me, bringing digital well-being into the heart of digital media literacies has meant reframing the *what* and *how* of my teaching. Well-being frames my interest in topics like privacy, digital footprint, online community, and fact-checking. Well-being informs my choices to center my teaching around curiosity, hope, choice, and equity. I do not enact those values perfectly, and in the moments where I feel those imperfections, well-being is also a reminder to forgive myself and keep trying.

References

Beetham, H. (2015). *Deepening digital know-how: Building digital talent. Key issues in framing the digital capabilities of staff in UK HE and FE*. Jisc. http://repository.jisc.ac.uk/6259/1/Deepening_Digital_Knowledge.pdf

Beetham, H. (2016, July 9). What is 'digital wellbeing'? *Helen Beetham.* https://helenbeetham.com/2016/07/09/blog-post-title-2/

Chambers, F., & Sandford, R. (2019). Learning to be human in a digital world: A model of values fluency education for physical education. *Sport, Education and Society*, *24*(9), 925–938. https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2018.1515071

Ciccone, M. (2020, September 2). Digital citizenship is about a whole lot more than online etiquette. *Education Week*. https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2020/08/20/digital-citizenship-is-about-a-whole-lot.html?cmp=soc-edit-tw

Digital citizenship education handbook. (2019). Council of Europe. http://www.vlebooks.com/vleweb/product/openreader?id=none&isbn=97892 87189394

Freire, P. & Macedo, Donaldo. (1987). *Literacy: Reading the word and the world.* Bergin & Garvey.

Ito, M., Odgers, C., Schueller, S., Cabrera, J., Conaway, E., Cross, R., & Hernandez, M. (2020). *Social media and youth wellbeing: What we know and where we could go.* Connected Learning Alliance. https://clalliance.org/youth-connections-for-wellbeing-report.pdf

Jenkins, H., Ito, M., & boyd, danah. (2016). *Participatory culture in a networked era: A conversation on youth, learning, commerce, and politics.* Polity Press.

Jisc. (2015). *Building digital capabilities: The six elements define*d. http://repository.jisc.ac.uk/6611/1/JFL0066F_DIGIGAP_MOD_IND_FRAM E.PDF

Gui, M., Fasoli, M., Carradore, R., & Carradore, R. (2017). "Digital well-being": Developing a new theoretical tool for media literacy research. *Italian Journal of Sociology of Education*, *9*(1), 155–173. https://doi.org/10.14658/pupj-ijse-2017-1-8