

***Seeding change: What VVH can teach us
about teaching and learning in digital spaces***

Michelle Ciccone

University of Massachusetts - Amherst, USA



Voices from the Field - Peer-reviewed article

Citation: Ciccone, M. (2021). Seeding change: What VVH can teach us about teaching and learning in digital spaces. *Journal of Media Literacy Education*, 13(3), 145-148. <https://doi.org/10.23860/JMLE-2021-13-3-14>

Corresponding Author:

Michelle Ciccone
mmciccone@umass.edu

Copyright: © 2021 Author(s). This is an open access, peer-reviewed article published by Bepress and distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License](#), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. JMLE is the official journal of [NAMLE](#).

Received: October 26, 2021

Accepted: December 2, 2021

Published: December 29, 2021

Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

[Editorial Board](#)

ABSTRACT

In this essay, I reflect on a central question: “why did I experience something so profoundly different in Virtually Viral Hangouts (VVH) than I was able to help seed in my own district during the COVID-19 crisis?” I identify three key components of the VVH ethos that inspired new ways of thinking, namely: digital technologies free us from constraints to build something different, digital technologies are most effective when we use them to build community, and digital collaboration enables us to tap into the wisdom of the group. As we build better and more humane educational spaces, it is important to remember that teachers are learners too, and the VVH ethos may help guide professional learning moving forward.

Keywords: *professional development, digital literacies, social-emotional learning.*



Journal of Media Literacy Education

THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR MEDIA LITERACY EDUCATION (NAMLE)
Online at www.jmle.org

INTRODUCTION

On Friday, March 13, 2020, amid reports of deepening community spread of COVID-19, my Massachusetts school district announced a two-week closure. The next day, I emailed district leaders to offer my support at the leadership team meeting that was set for that Monday, where they would begin to plan for the evolving unknown. As the Technology Integration Specialist at my high school, I felt that I had an important role to play as leaders assessed the current use of digital technologies and the digital literacies of staff and students. The reply to my email was appreciative, but I was assured that I was not needed yet. For the next two weeks, I was mostly in the dark about what the district was thinking in the “pivot” to distance learning. I obsessed over the question: “why isn’t my perspective seen to be of more value right now?”

During that time, I did find purpose, but it was not through my workplace: it was through Virtually Viral Hangouts (VVH). Each weekday between March 16 and June 1, we gathered on Zoom for 60 minutes to express our feelings, reflect on our work, and experiment with new ideas for remote education. The content of each VVH session changed every time we met, but the outline was simple and consistent: the session would start with an emotional check-in, followed by a small group activity, and then close with a whole group debrief discussion. (For more information on the format and logistics of VVH, see the other essays in this collection.) Throughout the spring of 2020, the VVH community continued to deepen in its personal and professional bond, demonstrating the power of digital technologies to connect us across place and space. Now with some distance, I wonder: “why did I experience something so profoundly different in VVH than I was able to help seed in my own district?”

Digital technologies create something new

When school suddenly went online in March, the question that was most often applied to educational technologies was, “how will this digital tool help me move what I do online?” On the face of it, this seems like a reasonable standard to apply to learning technologies, particularly at that moment when schools were expected to pivot to online very quickly and provide some sort of stability for students in uncertain times. The pressure put on teachers to offer school in a way that looked familiar to the public certainly encouraged widespread adoption of technology use that

mimicked the structures and expectations of the physical classroom.

But, digital technologies will more often than not disappoint if the expectation is that they will recreate online what is already done. (And, do all classroom practices really merit recreation?) Perrotta et al. (2021) analyzed the “platform pedagogy” of Google Classroom and found that:

the introduction of automation in the pedagogic environment does not eliminate teachers’ labour, but reconfigures it by generating new tasks that require teachers to synchronise effectively with the platform, and by slowly but perceptibly shifting their efforts from actual teaching to the 24/7 coordination, moderation and facilitation of student engagement. (p. 108)

I have found that once the reconfigured labor becomes apparent to my teacher colleagues, interest in technology integration is severely diminished. And so, as someone who is invested in the work of digital literacy development as a long-term project, I see the pursuit of recreation as a red herring, foreshadowing a brief shelf life for any enthusiasm to undertake this work.

Instead, in the spring of 2020, I was more interested in helping my school community think about how digital technologies could help free us from the constraints of the physical classroom, so that we could spend time with students in smaller groups and ask them what they needed to be successful – and then allow the space for whatever that was to happen. VVH demonstrated in real time that this was possible. We did not limit ourselves to recreating something particular – we allowed the online medium to inspire new ways of gathering, connecting, and sharing insights. These were not hypertechnical reinventions either, but by avoiding that recreation framing, VVH seeded new ideas and practices that will no doubt endure beyond this moment in time.

Digital technologies as enablers of community

Of course, the new ideas and practices seeded by VVH challenge preexisting beliefs – about not only the purposes of education in general but also the reasons for inviting digital technologies into teaching and learning in the first place. In K-12 education, debate about the proper balance between a focus on academics versus social-emotional learning is ongoing, particularly in the context of schooling disrupted by a global pandemic. The way in which digital technologies might meet a variety of needs bumps up against a host of entrenched

assumptions, including the belief that young people are “digital natives” and are therefore already expert users of technologies. Additionally, thinking about digital technologies as supports for social-emotional learning challenges strongly held beliefs about the ways in which these technologies can negatively impact social skills and perhaps lead to feelings of isolation. So, in this pivot to distance learning, we were negotiating these moral panics about digital technologies while at the same time relying on these tools for maintaining any semblance of connection to students, colleagues, and content. I saw these competing ideologies play out in my own school context, which in part led to inconsistent (and sometimes contradictory) adoption and adaptation of digital practices and pedagogies.

The success of VVH demonstrated that it is possible to create a supportive digital learning community where people are inspired to challenge themselves, express their feelings, and try out new ideas as they participate in ways that are comfortable for them. Through VVH, I began to see that as a Technology Integration Specialist I must make that connection for colleagues between the academic, the emotional, and the digital. And so, instead of the question “how will this digital tool help me move what I do online?” we can think of wholly new questions by which to evaluate digital resources, including: 1) How do these tools build community with my students? and 2) What digital pedagogies will allow more members of our learning community to participate and demonstrate what they know?

In order for educators to expand their beliefs about the community-building dimensions of digital technologies, they must experience it for themselves. Hobbs and Coiro (2019) write that “educators need to directly experience collaboration and inquiry as a process of messy engagement and problem solving to appreciate the cognitive, social, and emotional dimensions of digital literacy as they consider how best to support their own students” (p. 406). In the spring, some educators assumed that they would necessarily lose their connections to students and content when we moved to remote learning. In fact, at that point, what we needed was to facilitate experiences for educators so that they became part of invigorating and supportive digital communities themselves. Only then, could we even begin to reimagine schooling together.

Tapping into our collective wisdom

Many of us in the USA experienced a void in pandemic response leadership at local, state, and federal

levels. School district central offices waited for guidance from state departments of education that never came or came too late or were issued but then backtracked once enough negative feedback surfaced. Many decisions about local logistics and digital learning expectations that came from district central offices were made without meaningful input from all stakeholders – including teachers, students, and support staff – and often felt disconnected from the on-the-ground realities of remote schooling.

In contrast, VVH did not defer to any guidance or mandate: under the leadership of Renee Hobbs and Yonty Friesem, Founder and Associate Director of the Media Education Lab respectively, we simply began meeting, coalescing around an active, collaborative, and equitable learning community. Each of us engaged in the leadership role by facilitating at least one VVH session, and so, we were each able to share something about which we were passionate. Harris et al. (2013) describe this type of structure as *distributed leadership*, where “the leadership function is stretched over the work of a number of individuals, and the task is accomplished through interaction and collective action” (p. 929). They argue that this type of leadership structure is well-suited to collaborative digital spaces as it allows for “harnessing resources held by other actors and ...increasing the flow of information within the digital community” (p. 934). Because we were all leaders in the group and felt valued for what we could contribute, we were all fully invested in making VVH worthwhile and productive. This was empowering.

I wish all of my colleagues in my district had had similar experiences in the spring of 2020. Of course, district leaders acknowledged everyone’s hard work and dedication, but the traditional school district structures just do not allow the space, time, or incentive for tapping into our collective wisdom in a meaningful way. Schools certainly do care about the continued professional growth of staff, and all educators engage in ongoing professional learning. But, as Gale (2006) notes:

At worst, professional development is conceived as being done “to” and “on” teachers. It is technical in character, disconnected from teachers’ particular contexts and short-lived in effect. At best, teachers’ professional learning is conceived as done “with,” “by,” and “for” teachers. It is collaborative, generative and cognisant of broader agendas. (p. 20)

To me, it is a great tragedy that the overwhelming experiences of educators during the spring of 2020 and the 2020-21 school year was that of frustrated voicelessness when this could have been an opportunity

for reestablishing teachers as professionals who offer insight and expertise.

Teachers are learners, too

At the beginning of the 2020-21 school year, as school leaders were brainstorming what back-to-school professional development days should look like, I advocated for a VVH-inspired space to allow my teacher colleagues to reflect on what had worked for them in the spring, what had not, and how we were feeling moving into a new school year. I felt it was important to collectively acknowledge that the spring had been hard. Unfortunately, any interest in this idea was overshadowed by fear of opening up a can of worms that would no doubt invite us to reflect on not-quite-positive experiences. I thought back to the VVH emotional check-ins each day. There was no judgement, no expectations for positivity, no demands for participation. Emotions were never fixed; someone who might share on a Monday how down they felt might share on a Thursday how good they felt about progress they had made. For me, personally, having a space to check in with myself in a community helped me maintain perspective during a difficult time. I wanted this for my colleagues as well.

There is something deeply interconnected between how we think about teachers as learners and how we think about students as learners, particularly when it comes to thinking more expansively about the place of digital technologies in creating engaging, challenging, and supportive communities. Choi et al. (2018) note that “teachers need to successfully achieve online activities in democratic and varied ways” (p. 154) in order to help their students do the same, and therefore, it is essential to first build the “personal, social, and teacher identity as digital citizens based on their self-efficacy towards the effective use of the Internet and digital technologies” (p. 155). I regret that I was not able to spark a VVH-like experience in my district to support my colleagues in their own digital literacy development. But, I will carry the VVH ethos with me as we all continue to reflect on what we experienced during the COVID-19 crisis. If we are to build better and more humane educational spaces, we must help each other abandon old constraints, assumptions, and fears.

REFERENCES

Choi, M., Cristol, D., & Gimbert, B. (2018). Teachers as digital citizens: The influence of individual

backgrounds, internet use and psychological characteristics teachers’ levels of digital citizenship. *Computers & Education*, 121, 143-161.

Gale, T. (2006). How did we ever arrive at the conclusion that teachers are the problem? A critical reading in the discourses of Australia schooling. *English in Australia*, 41(2), 12-26.

Harris, A., Jones, M., & Baba, S. (2013). Distributed leadership and digital collaborative learning: A synergistic relationship? *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 44(6), 926-939.

Hobbs, C., & Coiro, J. (2019). Design features of a professional development program in digital literacy. *International Literacy Association*, 62(4), 401-409.

Perrotta, C., Gulson, K. N., Williamson, B., & Witzemberger, K. (2021). Automation, APIs and the distributed labour of platform pedagogies in Google Classroom. *Critical Studies in Education*, 62(1), 97-113.