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Literacy for the Digital Immigrant

Peggy L. Chinn

If you were born after the year 2000 and in a part of the world that is connected to social media on the internet, you are likely to be a digital native! The rest of us who are immigrating into this culture at various paces watch in awe as the youngsters around us navigate the digital world—a world that to us often seems incomprehensible. If we are to remain connected to the world as it is becoming, then it is necessary to become a curious tourist, if not a fully landed immigrant!

I have documented parts of my own journey as a digital immigrant on my blog, where I have addressed digital literacy (Chinn 2011b), challenges of the dizzying pace of technological change (Chinn 2011a), and twitter for the digital immigrant (Chinn 2012). In these blog posts, I have addressed cultural tensions that can serve as barriers to becoming reasonably adept in the digital world. These tensions involve fears around what might be lost when information shifts from print to digital formats, as well as fears about the social consequences of a digital world where virtual interactions replace face-to-face interactions. The following sections describe these tensions and fears, and suggest ways to move around and beyond them.

Complexity and Volume of Information

The digital world has ushered in a volume of information that overwhelms digital immigrants. This fact highlights one of the major skills that is required in the digital age, identified as “the ability to recognize when information is needed and to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information” (Bruce 2009).

When information was only available in print, people had a relatively limited range of information that could be accessed, and most people assumed that it was a straightforward matter to evaluate the reliability and validity of information. In the print world, hours of time are required to investigate the breadth of possibility within a given topic of interest. In the context of digital resources, even traditional print resources are accessible in a relatively rapid time frame. The ability to discern important features of a resource, quickly scan the landscape and select the most salient is one of the most important skills of the digital culture.

Once salient resources are identified in a digital context, the judgment of worth of any resource becomes more complex than in the print-only world, but the potential for more sound judgment of worth is great. The basis for judging the worth of information is similar to that used for print media, but the range of information that can be used is significantly expanded once you access digital resources. Consider the criteria that I have provided for students in evaluating the salience of material on the Web:

- Authorship
 - o Who is the author, what are their credentials, and what qualifies this author in relation to this information?
 - o Is there a bias reflected in the presentation of the information, or in the sources of authority that the author draws on?
 - o Does the author's biographical history suggest a conflict of interest, or a bias relative to this information?

- Context and Perspective
 - o Does the information come from a source that is affiliated with a group that has special interest in a particular point of view?
 - o Does the information provided reveal a diverse range of perspectives?
 - o Is there evidence of external support or review of the information presented?
 - o Is there evidence of any economic benefit that influences the information presented?
 - o Is there an explicit or implicit religious, political, or social agenda?

- Currency
 - o Is the information dated?
 - o Is there an indication that the information has been updated, and if so, when?
 - o What sources were used for any updated information?

- Substantiation
 - o What does the author use as the basis for the information presented?
 - Scholarly literature or research?
 - Theories and concepts?
 - Expert opinion? If so, whose?
 - Religious authority?
 - Legal authority?

- Corroboration
 - o Can you locate other independent sources that corroborate the information presented?
 - o What is the reliability and validity of the corroborating sources?

Democratization of Knowledge

A central vision that the creator of HTML (the language of the World Wide Web) Tim Berners-Lee had for the Web was that it would remain accessible to all in order to democratize information and knowledge (Berners-Lee 2000). This ideal is constantly under siege, but the fact that it has so far been realized to a significant extent has shifted the balance of power in many realms of life, including nursing and health care. It is true that people have access to information that on the one hand may be superficial, or on the other beyond their capacity to fully appreciate. However, for the most part, when someone has a dedicated interest focused on a topic, that person can readily become a real expert on that topic. Consider, for example, the extensive knowledge base that many

people with chronic illness conditions have concerning their condition because they have diligently searched the web for information, and more important, they have connected with others who share their condition using social media networks.

This context presents to the professional digital immigrant the imperative to become fully acquainted with the digital resources available to the public. As daunting as this seems, you can take the lead of your students, clients, or patients who have already ventured into the vast digital world. As a professional with a background of expertise and knowledge, you have a special ability to make rapid and sound judgments about what you find, but your students or clients often have advanced know-how in navigating the digital world of information and social interaction.

Shifts in the Nature of Social Interaction and Community

Increasingly I find myself in situations with a group of people who are all staring at our mobile devices, some of us reading email, some searching the web, others catching up with the latest on twitter or facebook. On the surface, this appears as parallel play, with limited social interaction. In fact, in my experience our various digital enterprises are expanding our social world to include not only those in the physical room, but also a wide range of connections throughout the world. Mobile devices have changed the nature of face-to-face social interaction in ways that some see as negative, but in fact they extend connections to others regardless of physical location. The "parallel mobile surfing" experience takes some people off to other networks of interaction, but it also provides the possibility for "outside" influences and information to be brought into the local group.

The realm of social interaction is also a place of risk and vulnerability, especially for children. Just as in all areas of life that call for measures to reduce vulnerability, the digital world requires not only digital resources, but basic education about best practices that users can follow in protecting themselves from digital viruses, scams perpetrated through email and on the web, and social overtures that could be malicious.

Shift to Multiliteracies

One of the definitions of digital literacy offered on the "Chip's Journey" blog states:

. . . multiliteracies highlights two related aspects of the increasing complexity of texts: (a) the proliferation of multimodal ways of making meaning where the written word is increasingly part and parcel of visual, audio, and spatial patterns; [and] (b) the increasing salience of cultural and linguistic diversity characterized by local diversity and global connectedness. (Bruce 2009)

This definition highlights an important shift that is taking place in the digital age. The "written word" is not going away, but unlike the primacy that it has held for centuries, now the actuality of the slogan "a picture is worth a thousand words" is fully integrated into daily life. The more that journal content moves to a digital format, the more we will see color, photographs, graphs, video, and audio that enhances not only the reading experience, but also the richness of meaning that can be conveyed multilingually.

The literacy shift away from almost exclusive reliance on written language came to life for many print media natives with the introduction of icons as the basic means of navigation on a personal computer. Icons were not simply cute little symbols, they revolutionized and streamlined digital

communication that extends beyond the limitations of the user's native spoken language.

The Future is Now

There are no easy formulas for entering unfamiliar territory. Becoming literate in a digital world is a gradual process. It requires patience, determination, and a large dose of good humor! There is no turning back—the digital world is here to stay, and it is a world of constantly changing landscapes. There is nothing to be gained by resisting the changes, and everything to be gained by embracing the values that can be gained.

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Author

Peggy L. Chinn, PhD, RN, FAAN, is Professor Emerita, University of Connecticut, Storrs, Connecticut, USA, and Editor of *Advances in Nursing Science*, Oakland, California, USA. Her email is peggy.chinn@uconn.edu. Read her blog at <http://peggychinn.wordpress.com>

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