

Fascinating Attention: Digital literacies in the FACE of digital distractions

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Abstract

Adjusting to new modes of digital behaviour and a developing digital identity is a critical part of the transition experience in higher education as students move from recreational to professional approaches to digital connection and communication. This paper argues that digital literacies must include socio-emotional literacies that enable digital encounters as embodied practices with a full range of cognitive, attentional, affective, and somatic elements. Drawing on the psychology of mindfulness literature we present a model for developing focused attention and embracing the digital as a space of creativity and engagement rather than as a space for passive exploration of information.

This paper presents a model that extends what Eshet-Alkalai (2004; 2012) calls 'socio-emotional digital literacy' by focusing on an engaged model of online encounter that addresses both the inter and intra subjective level of these experiences. It draws on work in the psychology of mindful attention to extend current conceptions of digital literacies; and it provides a framework which values the digital experience as a genuine encounter rather than as a necessarily-second-best substitute for face-to-face communication.

Although digital modes of encounter are now an integrated part of all aspects of everyday life they are still perceived as controversial and often presented as threats to social relationships and complex undistracted thinking (Gray 2015). But as Jones and Hafner (2012, p. 11) point out, similar moral panics have been propagated with the introduction of each new "technology" including Socrates' panic following the invention of writing.

Sherry Turkle, a pioneer in researching our complex interactions with technology as a site of pleasure, connection and learning (Turkle 1984; 1995; 2011; 2015), has moved from being an early technological enthusiast to being a more cautious commentator on the complexities of digital life. In her 2011 book *Alone Together* she warns against surrendering to either "triumphalist or apocalyptic narratives about how to live with technology". Instead Turkle proposes what she calls "Realtechnik" – a sceptical mode that doesn't embrace either easy narratives of linear progress or equally easy narratives of disaster. However in her latest book *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* Turkle (2015) champions face-to-face-conversation and urges us to "put technology in its place":

Face-to-face conversation unfolds slowly. It teaches patience. We attend to tone and nuance. When we communicate on our digital devices, we learn different habits. As we ramp up the volume and velocity of our online connections, we want immediate answers. In order to get them, we ask simpler questions; we dumb down our communications, even on the most important matters. And we become accustomed to a life of constant interruption.

While we would not dispute the emotional power and importance of face-to-face conversation, this paper argues that digital encounters can also "unfold slowly"; "attend to tone and nuance" and do not necessarily "dumb down our communications" or avoid

complex questions. They can in fact be viewed as embodied practices with a full range of cognitive, attentional, affective, and somatic elements.

The Context

This work arises out of two different contexts where the authors have been working to develop a model for facilitating online engagement. The model described here was first developed in the context of a Zen Buddhist Community group who wished to establish a “Digital Dojo” – an online interaction space for sharing spiritual practice. The group met monthly but needed to develop ways of sustaining their practice in the intervening weeks. They also wanted to find ways of involving an increasingly, geographically, widely-dispersed membership. As such our initial focus was on a formative model for adults transitioning to new experiences of extended digital group-based communication. The second context is first year students in higher education, who similarly are moving to a new learning context and need to deploy new understandings of digital engagement.

The particularity of the first context has been influential in extending our ideas of digital literacy for higher education students in important ways. At the heart of Zen practice is the development of mindful awareness, so any interaction in the digital space needed to maintain this focus on the development of attentive intimacy. This led to the question: How can mindful awareness be developed as a digital literacy? In this paper we present a theoretical model currently in development that addresses this question. It will be tested with both the Zen Buddhist group and with first year students at the University of Wollongong.

Digital Literacies

In their introduction to a recent collection of essays on the multiple conceptualisations of digital literacies Colin Lankshear and Michele Knobel (2008) distinguish between: approaches which emphasise conceptual definitions and those which seek to operationalise standardised skill sets and task lists. But more significantly they point to the idea of literacies as a set of socially organised practices:

A way of reading a certain type of text is acquired *only* when it is acquired in a “fluent” or “native-like” way, by one’s being embedded in (apprenticed as a member of) a *social practice* wherein people not only *read* texts of this type in these ways but also *talk* about such texts in certain ways, *hold certain beliefs and values* about them, and *socially interact* over them in certain ways . . . Texts are parts of *lived, talked, enacted, value-and-belief-laden* practices carried out in specific places and at specific times (7)

Conceptualising digital literacies as socially organised practice is critical in a higher education context. Numerous researchers (Bennett, Maton & Kervin 2008; Gallardo-Echenique, Marqués-Molíias, Bullen & Strijbos 2015) have shown that while “digital native” entrants into higher education do have a range of social digital skills and experiences many lack the context and frameworks to adapt these skills to a learning or professional context.

Conceptualising digital literacies as learning to engage with digital artefacts that “are parts of *lived, talked, enacted, value-and-belief-laden* practices” is also the key step in going beyond what David Buckingham (2008) has critiqued as the functional and information focused preoccupation of many digital literacies frameworks:

From this perspective, a digitally literate individual is one who can search efficiently, who compares a range of sources, and sorts authoritative from non-authoritative, and relevant from irrelevant, documents. There is little recognition here of the symbolic or persuasive aspects of

digital media, of the emotional dimensions of our uses and interpretations of these media, or indeed of aspects of digital media that exceed mere «information». (77)

Eshet-Alkalai (2004) suggests that socio-emotional literacy is in fact one of the key domains of digital literacy alongside photo-visual literacy; reproduction literacy; information literacy; and branching literacy. Significantly he sees socio-emotional digital literacy as highly related to the other domains:

Socio-emotional digital literacy appears to be the most complex of all the types of digital literacy... In order to acquire this skill, users must be very critical, analytical, and mature, and must have a high degree of information literacy and branching literacy... socio-emotionally-literate users...are willing to share data and knowledge with others, capable of information evaluation and abstract thinking, and able to collaboratively construct knowledge. (2004:102)

Although he acknowledges that socio-emotional literacy is required to both “derive benefits” and to avoid “traps” in cyberspace his description focuses on avoiding hoaxes, discerning subterfuge and guarding privacy.

This tendency to focus on the “traps” when describing socio-emotional digital literacy is inline with public discourses described in the introduction to this paper that perceive the digital as a threat to the development of genuine human connections and sustained attention.

This does not mean that connection and attention should not be addressed as part of developing new modes of interaction in a digital environment. However genuine socio-emotional digital literacy involves more than developing specific techniques to avoid or deal with “digital distraction”. As with other forms of mind training such techniques can play an important role in developing ongoing cognitive capacity. But what we are proposing in this paper is not a set of techniques but a heuristic model of online engagement and attention as an enactive process drawing on a range of embodied and environmental cues to create a balanced self-sufficient system that supports digital interaction.

Mind training and an enactive approach

A variety of models have been developed in the psychology of mindful attention such as the R.A.I.N. model used as part of Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction programs. It urges participants to work through a staged process of Recognize/ Accept/ Investigate/ Note when dealing with difficult emotions and addictive behaviors (Schuman-Olivier, Hoepfner, Evins & Brewer 2014).

Halifax’s (2012; 2014) G.R.A.C.E. model of engaged compassion training for nurses and palliative care workers takes this approach a step further. Halifax (2012: 1) resists the view that compassion is a discrete thing, ‘a kind of muscle that can be trained’. Building on the work of the philosopher Evan Thompson, Halifax frames compassion as an “enactive process” (Halifax, 2012:1): a phenomenon that “arises as an emergent process and includes attentional, somatosensory, and cognitive processes that are embedded in and responsive to context” (2).

Enacted processes deliberately emphasise the element of intersubjectivity in order to move beyond the limitations of individualism. In other words: there is a shift towards emphasising the subjective relationships in a given process (Thompson & Di Paolo, 2014). Halifax’s G.R.A.C.E model hinges on four main axes: the attentional, the cognitive, the affective, and the somatic. To help practitioners engage more easily it is summarised neatly using the acronym G.R.A.C.E: **G**athering attention (focus, grounding, balance) /**R**ecalling intention

(motivations)/ Attuning to self/other (somatic, affective, cognitive attunement) Considering (insight discernment: What will serve?)/ Engage/End.

Our F.A.C.E. model for online engagement similarly draws on attentional, cognitive, affective, and somatic elements. The acronym F.A.C.E. is a map to a terrain within which awareness can lead to creative, pro-social actions as we view/read/absorb and contribute to digital spaces. Each element entails a focus on the development of *digital literacies* and attuning to an *alternative story* that reconsiders our experience of digital spaces from a strengths-based perspective. The model works both as a mental checklist for a process of engagement, decision-making and action in online interaction but it also has the potential to work more deeply as a focus of discussion about digital experience more generally. A core practice for those using the F.A.C.E model is learning to understand how they co-produce the story of digital spaces and how they can be agents of 're-authoring'.

PROCESS	DIGITAL LITERACY	NEW STORY
Fascination: <i>What are you fascinated by at this moment? Two parts: Where is my attention? What does my attention reveal about what is important to me right now? How might I share this unique insight with others?</i>	Recognising and developing an awareness of where our attention is drawn as we move through digital spaces and how this is governed by feelings, interests and choices. This is the first stage in digital decision-making capacity.	Fascination is a strengths based frame for the way our attention might wander. It emphasises curiosity and our aptitudes for following our interests. This process is understood as synonymous with the way our attention will wander in other non-digital spaces.
Attunement: <i>As I become aware of my fascination: What do I notice in my body? Does this help me to understand my fascination? What am I feeling?</i>	Recognising the role of body experiences in digital participation. Learning to translate this somatic awareness into action (eg. recognising agitation in the body, I might choose to delay responding to a comment on a post).	Contrary to common narratives, participating in digital spaces is mediated somatically. Our embodiment directly shapes our online behavior and choices
Creativity: <i>How can you express this creatively? Considering the many options for ways in which to express your fascination/attunement.</i>	Understanding genres and developing a varied vocabulary of response with different media and expressive forms: from the simplest punctuation, to emoji, video, or dynamic content. Recognising that even in highly designed digital spaces we have the ability to make choices and to play with form expressively.	Viewing the vast options of the internet is often spoken of as overwhelming. This new approach asks us to look at this digital landscape as a pallet of creative options. We do not need to do everything, but we can do something. This locates the locus of control within the digital participant.
Engagement/Evaluate/End: <i>Proceed with your idea. How can you also engage others? Particularly: How can we also elicit and discover others' fascination? What are they aware of? Importantly, take a moment to end the process when it is time to move to the next fascination.</i>	Learning how to translate our awareness into action. Understating that this can be experimental and iterative. How well did our experiment go? Did people receive our ideas? Or could we do something differently to help next time? This recognizes the extended timeframe and intersubjectivity of digital activity: it is a series of interconnected actions.	Rather than ricocheting around digital spaces being constantly triggered, and reacting habitually to our triggers, we are now digital participants - with a sense of agency and deliberateness. Building our own resiliency and exploring ways to engage with others. We go to these spaces when we choose, those spaces have their place but do not take over our lives.

The acronym signals that in engaging online we are showing each other our *face*, something of our embodied selves. It emphasises that embodiment plays a key role in moderating our ability to attune to others wellbeing and the emergence of compassionate actions. It is also an

integrated model that is not meant to imply a strictly linear process, with the different elements iteratively influencing one another. This model also goes beyond previous approaches to mindful digital engagement such as digital de-cluttering and digital Sabbaths (Rosen 2012). While such step-back processes can be useful stock-take activities, used in isolation they create a dualistic approach to technology and everyday life. The model needs to be trialled further with a variety of student cohorts and resources developed to enable it to be embedded in curriculum. However this enactive model frames technological encounters as life processes that require the same kinds of cognitive, attentional, affective and somatic focus as any other encounter and therefore we believe it makes an important contribution to extending the complexity of thinking about the socio-emotional domain of digital literacies.

Focus for audience discussion

How do ideas of fascination and curiosity start to reframe the story of “digital distractions”? How could we use this in class to encourage mindful digital encounters? Where are our bodies when we are online? How do bodily sensations help us connect with our fascinations?

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