



# EMPOWERING STUDENTS WITH DIGITAL SKILLS

## Digital literacy as a pathway to joy in learning

By **Amy Hutchison**



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*W*e have all heard about the importance of preparing students for an unknown, ever-changing future in which digital literacy skills will be essential for nearly all jobs. I have written about this topic many times. I frequently urge educators to expose students to a range of digital technologies, to help students develop coding literacy, and to support the development of students' digital literacy skills so that they are not left behind in a time of digital revolution. Yet rarely do I mention the joy that comes from applying digital literacy skills to create and share ideas or from seeing what can be accomplished with digital technologies.

It's time to correct this oversight. Let's explore the joys that can come from learning digital literacy skills and becoming digitally literate.

## It all starts with digital literacy

Examples of awe-inspiring uses of digital technologies abound and continue to expand. Just recently, I was completely amazed that 3-D printing had provided a new solution to homelessness. Yes, you read that right. Homes can now be constructed at significantly reduced costs with a 3-D printer, and in March of 2021, a homeless man became the first person in the United States to live in a 3-D-printed home. Not to steal a phrase from well-known joy creator Marie Kondo, but that sparks joy for me!

Similarly awe-inspiring, *TIME* magazine's first Kid of the Year, Gitanjali Rao, uses digital technology to tackle issues of contaminated drinking water and cyberbullying. Although these are grand examples, such accomplishments start with the development of digital literacy skills. None of these accomplishments would be possible without the ability to digitally read, write, and create.

## How learning digital literacy sparks joy

Although there can be only one *TIME* Kid of the Year, there can be great joy in less grand digital creations and in learning about what is possible when you are digitally literate. For example, digital tools provide abundant methods for students to express their ideas creatively. Whether students are digitally drawing or painting images, recording videos, or coding an animated story scene, having the digital literacy skills to create and share ideas can bring joy to students in ways that nondigital expression cannot.

I hypothesize that the main reason for this joy is that having digital literacy skills greatly expands the possibilities for how students can express their ideas and with whom they can share them. Having multiple means of expression is not just motivating but also ensures that students can respond in ways that best suit their strengths,

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interests, and context. This doesn't mean that students should always respond and create with digital tools or that they will always want to. Rather, by having digital literacy skills, they have options—and options can be empowering in a way that sparks joy.

## Digital literacy empowers students

Learning digital skills can also empower students who are often disenfranchised in school settings, such as students with learning disabilities and challenges. There are abundant anecdotal examples of teachers discovering that students with disabilities are equally, or more, savvy than their neurotypical peers when it comes to navigating and creating with digital tools. Discovering what they can do with digital tools can provide disenfranchised students with a sense of purpose and motivation.

For example, in a recent research study with elementary students on the autism spectrum, my team discovered that autistic students learning computer science through literacy were able to participate in lessons in ways that exceeded teachers' expectations, and they were motivated to go beyond the lesson requirements and continue the literacy activities at home. The teachers reported that learning the digital literacy skills to code digital stories created joy for their learners.

Additionally, digital texts and tools can empower students because they often come with options such as voice-to-text and text-to-speech, audio recording features, and opportunities to combine written words, spoken words, and images. These features help ensure that students can express their ideas even when traditional reading and writing skills are difficult or still developing. They create the

opportunity to participate in the classroom community when it would not otherwise be possible.

## Learning digital literacy creates future joy

My daughter, who is a first grader, recently found a book in a Little Free Library that contained a map in the endpapers. She immediately became interested in reading a map and wanted to know if we had any books with maps in them at home. She was crestfallen when I told her that I couldn't think of any. Then I remembered that she has access to a world of books through the digital book websites provided by her school. Although she prefers paper books to digital books, she was thrilled to know that a book with maps might be available to her online, and she was even more pleased that she knew how to access and search for books with maps.

When we returned home, she promptly accessed the book site and conducted a search for books about maps. She then joyously shared her results with me when she found four books that she liked. I share this anecdote to illustrate how having the skills to find and read digital books created joy. There was no frustration over how to find the book or how to do the search because she already had the skills she needed and was able to make use of them at just the right time. By developing these skills before she needed them, she was able to experience the joy that comes from having digital literacy skills.

Although digital literacy is just one component of the repertoire of literacy skills that we need to help our students develop, it is an increasingly important part and one that can create joy in learning. ■