

The Durham Digital Literacy Project

Report by Dr Cristina Costa and Dr Michaela Oliver, February 2023

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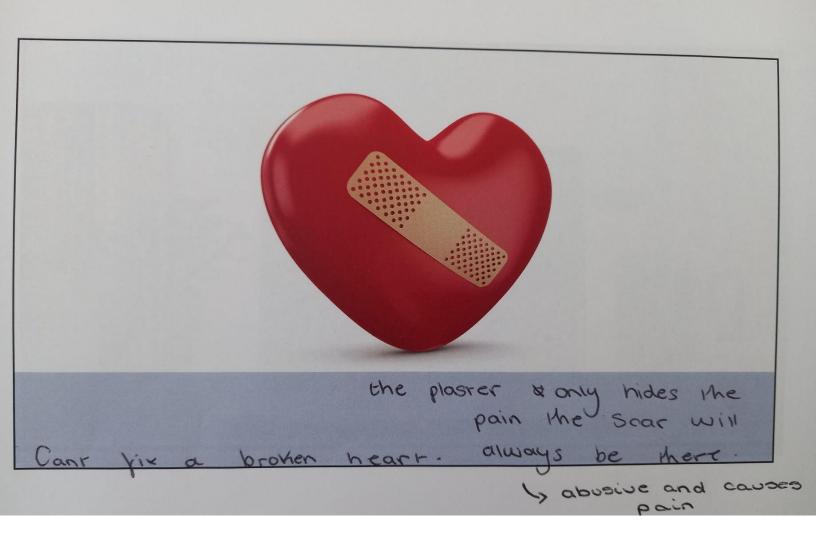


Figure 1- Example of Year 9 Student's understanding of sexting

The digital Durham Literacy Project

Introduction

The Durham Digital Literacy Project enacted a collaboration between Durham University and a School Trust in the northeast of England. In this project, researchers worked with High Grove Academy¹ (a state-funded secondary school that runs independent of local authority control) to develop lessons offered to one of their year group cohorts (Year 9/10). 160 school students participated in the project.

The purpose of the Durham Digital Literacy Project was to develop a digital literacy programme which fostered a holistic approach to tackling some of the key digital challenges faced by children and young people. The holistic approach sought involvement from a range of stakeholders and created collaborations between schools and the University, and between school and University students. Meaningful partnerships were developed to enable the different parties to benefit from these interactions, with the ultimate intention of creating learning opportunities to address some of the key digital challenges faced today.

The Durham Digital Literacy project thus aimed to offer practice-based, relevant interventions in schools by engaging different stakeholders (students, parents and teachers) in enhancing their digital literacy knowledge.

The activities developed in the project were delivered in schools by university students, who acted as digital ambassadors. Using University students as digital ambassadors is underpinned by an understanding that knowledge and cultural practices (also in the digital world) are best attained through *fresh contacts* (Mannheim, 1952). The convergence of these two groups of students is bound by social and cultural locations, factors that have the potential to unite them 'in style' (ibid, p. 192) and in practice, in this case, digital practices. Stakeholders therefore engaged with 'up-to-dateness' from those who are likely to be closer to the issues under discussion. University students represented significant others, being nearer in both age and experience to school students when compared to their teachers or the researchers. University students also benefitted from an approach which allowed them to experience the application of academic knowledge to practice.

The project embraced a critical perspective on digital literacies. Focus went beyond the idea of digital literacies that could be defined as instrumentalist, i.e., basic skills needed to access and navigate digital technology. Although we acknowledge the importance of such aptitudes, the project aimed to foster social and cultural knowledge of the context in which digital practices occur. The acquisition of such tacit knowledge is much harder to teach for.

"Knowledge and cultural practices of the digital world are best attained through fresh contacts (Mannheim, 1952)... with 'up-to-dateness' from those who are likely to be closer to the issues under discussion."

¹ Research site has been pseudonymised for privacy purposes

The Durham Digital Literacy project therefore fostered a researchinformed perspective of digital literacies as a discipline-specific form of knowledge (Oliver, 2021) that combines the mastery of deliberative and ethical forms of communication (Habermas, 1970, 1979) with understandings about how digital environments work (Costa, 2019; 2017). The project aimed to enable digital users to make informed decisions about their online activity.

The project ultimately intended to extend the reach of the University to support non-academic and non-traditional audiences in the acquisition of literacies and knowledge essential to today's society. Through the project, we have widened our sphere of influence beyond academic debate into practice, equipped school students with appropriate digital literacies (based on technical, ethical and reasoning practices), and provided University students with valuable skills for future employment in a digital society.

Conceptualisation of digital literacies

The project began with a conceptualization of digital literacies as skill sets necessary to effective engagement in digital citizenship and day-today practice. These skill sets refer to capacities of opinion formation (digital reasoning), intersubjective understanding (digital being), and cultural adaptation (digital integrity) that require scaffolding, mentoring, and bespoke support in curricula designs reflective of a digital logic.



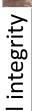
igital reasoning

- Evaluation of quality of digital content (including fake news);
- Awareness of information publication norms (digital genres);
- Development of informed opinion (engagement in deliberative practices online).



Digital being

- •(Re)Presentation of self via one's digital footprint;
- Wellbeing and selfpreservation approaches;
- Engagement and interaction in ethical forms of dialogue (interacting respectfully).



Digital integrity

- Cyber-security (navigating risks);
- Privacy and data protection strategies (understanding how the digital world works, including its commercial imperatives);
- Anti-bullying tactics (embracing difference, kindness and compassion).

Through the Durham Digital Literacy Project, we aimed to equip all parties involved with a comprehensive set of skills that digital users are compelled to learn in an increasingly digitised world. Critical digital literacies thus become embedded in everyday digital use, extending and interconnecting different spheres of action — school, home, vocational and social life. This affords opportunities for educational experiences. This project aimed to acknowledge the wider spheres of action impacting upon young people's lived experiences by addressing, rather than avoiding, risky practices (e.g. sexting, fake news). The project prompted discursive analysis of such topics and encouraged the formation of ideas and informed attitudes, placing students as digital ethical beings.

The design of digital literacy sessions

This project aimed to apply academic knowledge to practice. Two key concepts were applied: 1) Digital literacies were understood as representing a key form of digital cultural knowledge (see Costa & Li, forthcoming), while 2) the concept of "disciplinary-specific reasoning" (see Oliver, 2021) was employed as a meaningfully interrelated approach to teaching and learning critical digital literacies. The combination of the two concepts supported development of a methodological model translating research into practice with explicit focus on task design and contextual curriculum imagination, i.e., drawing on activities that resemble digital environments students are familiar with.

The project was developed in three phases:

- Desk research was conducted in relation to the digital literacy sessions selected in consultation with the collaborating school. Sexting and misinformation were the topics identified as most problematic and prevalent with the cohort of young people targeted for the Digital Literacy Project. The desk research activities ensured development of an informed view of the identified digital issues. These understandings supported the design of the activities for the school sessions.
 - a. Reading cards were created as part of the desk research phase. These captured key findings from existing literature and recommendations relevant to the two selected digital issues. Reading cards were used as part of the training provided to digital ambassadors.

"The combination of the two concepts [digital literacies and discipline-specific reasoning] supported development of a methodological model translating research into practice with explicit focus on task design."

- 2. **Design of sessions** followed principles of digital practices and critical pedagogy. Detailed lesson plans were produced. Sessions were designed to support students':
 - a. prior knowledge and lived experience of the topics under exploration;
 - b. **deliberative action** through engaging them in discussions that aimed to consider their views and digital activity;
 - c. creative input by finishing each session with students' own, tangible creations as a manifestation of their learning and perspectives on the issues explored.
- 3. **Training of digital ambassadors** which included:
 - a) engagement with the reading cards;
 - sharing of the lesson plan and trialing of the activities in small student groups. This provided experience of the teaching and learning context;
 - c) reflection on potential issues/challenges in the classroom environment.

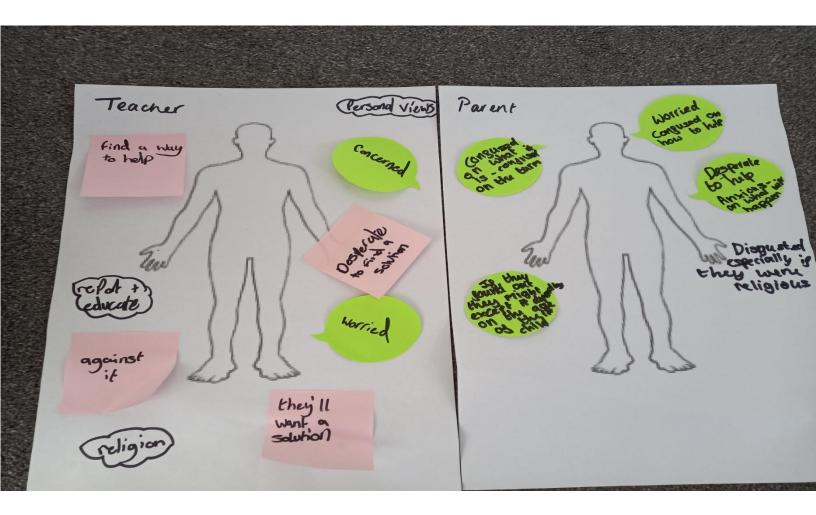


Figure 3 - Example of deliberative activity with Year 9 students. The activity aimed to encourage deliberation about how different groups of people approach sexting

Research Methods

To evaluate the Durham Digital Literacy project intervention, the researchers organised a comprehensive approach to elicit participants' views and experiences. This included different forms of data collection:

- Notes from researchers' observations;
- Completed school student tasks (e.g. memes created);
- School students' feedback forms;
- Digital Ambassadors' reflective entries;
- Teachers' feedback;
- Focus group interviews with school students;
- Focus group interviews with digital ambassadors;
- Interviews with the School Improvement Director and Assistant Headteacher of the participating school.

Findings

Given the variety of stakeholders involved in the project, findings are divided according to three main groups: school students, University students and schools.

School students

Three main findings emerged in relation to curriculum design and students' learning and experience. These findings relate to 1) the role of dialogic task design foregrounding discipline-specific reasoning; 2) the role of digital ambassadors as session convenors; and 3) the meaning of learner-driven creative outputs as manifestations of learning.

1. Digital literacies sessions for sexting and misinformation were designed to promote reasoning and dialogue. These sessions are deemed complex because they resonate with personal choices and actions of conduct (for example, sexting) and/or may require disclosure of vulnerability, for example, admitting to being deceived by fake news (misinformation). The sessions designed for the Durham Digital Literacy Project (see Appendix 1) were developed with this in mind, aiming to create safe spaces for students' views to be explored free of judgement. Drawing on critical pedagogy principles, the sessions aimed to cater for student voice, allowing students to express their views, explore different points of view and develop revised understandings of the issues at hand. Students deemed this approach key in their engagement with the complex topics they were asked to address. Creating sessions that placed students' understandings at the core of the discussions created a shift in practice, from a preventive approach of "knowing what and what not to do" (mainly delivered via informative sessions) to an approach where deliberation and dialogue were foregrounded and debating opportunities provided. The replacement of prescriptive approaches with those that privileged multiple perspectives, especially students' own views, was something the students themselves noticed and appreciated:

It was fun to learn about things that aren't always spoken about.... I had never thought of it [sexting] from different points of view (Student Feedback 15).

[this session] made me realise that people have different opinions (Student Feedback 17).

[I liked] seeing things from a different point of view (Student Feedback 19).

It [felt] less judgmental (Student Focus Group 1).

[It made me think about] the ethicality of taking, sending and receiving inappropriate images (Student Feedback 20).

2. The presence of the digital ambassadors was deemed essential to the success of the sessions. School students claimed that being led in their reflections and discussions by people closer in age to them made them more at ease and more open to contribute to the dialogic activities. There was a sense of comfort and reassurance in having 'other young people' hosting the sessions. The proximity in generations, not only regarding age but digital experience too, developed an atmosphere of trust and personalisation.

It is much easier to talk to ambassadors than with teachers... [I] wouldn't have joined in as much [otherwise]...it is weird to talk to

teachers [about sexting]" (Student Focus Group 1).

[Student ambassadors were] good at interacting and communicating (Student Feedback 8).

[We] had a lot of help (Student Feedback 24).

The students were engaged really well by the hosts (Teacher's Feedback 1).

The digital ambassadors and I arrived early so that we can set up the room in advance of the session. We have managed to get everything in place before they arrive... and soon the commotion starts, I hear them approaching the room...as they start entering it, they look at me without much enthusiasm, but as I point them to the group tables headed by the digital ambassadors I can see a smile... there is some relief in realising that it is them (university students) and not me they will be working with... and I say to myself 'I get it' (Researchers' Notes).

3. The sessions relied on creative input from participants, first through discussion and debate, and engagement in activities, and later through their own creations as reflective of digital participation that is intrinsically linked to creative input. Students' creations aimed to reflect learning developed within the sessions, helping to solidify understandings of the topics discussed and allowing students to distill key messages/understandings which were personal to them. Students appreciated the hands-on approach and wished to have this aspect featured in other learning opportunities (outside of the Digital Literacy Project).

Using memes helped us to understand since our generation uses memes a lot (Student Feedback 16).

I liked making the comic strips (Student Feedback 32)...[and] our own storyboards (Student Feedback 42)

I was gonna say that they enjoyed it, as well, just because lots of the feedback that we got is that they wish it was longer ... which is quite nice (University Student Digital Ambassador Focus Group, P2).

University students as digital ambassadors

The project seemed to also produce benefits for university students who served on the project as digital ambassador. They particularly emphasised the experiences gained within the project as representing a worthwhile opportunity to work with schools/ outside the University under the expert guidance and leadership of the researchers. Students identified the possibility for involvement in educational research projects as valuable to their own development and experiences. Student ambassadors also regarded the opportunity to work on the project as essential to boost their knowledge about digital technology in education, especially digital literacies, something that did not think to be covered in sufficient depth in their own degree programmes.

I didn't know a lot about digital literacy before the performance so it was a good experience and [helped] to expand my knowledge on it (University Student Digital Ambassador Focus Group, P1).

[I'm] not a Primary Ed [student].... we don't do any placements. So having some time in the classroom, [was] one of the big reasons I wanted to do it (University Student Digital Ambassador Focus Group, P4).

I wanted to be involved in a research project and my experience in like the field of education, from a research point of view (University Student Digital Ambassador Focus Group, P5).

All the kids are certainly engaged. ... having that last activity, you can see that most of the children do get an idea of what it was. And you could almost assess from them making the cartoons of what they've understood about it (University Student Digital Ambassador Focus group, P1).

One kid said it didn't feel like a lesson, which I thought was really good because it's like they got all the information and you could see it but it was sort of like you know, it wasn't like a formal setting

(University Student Digital Ambassador Focus Group, P5).

Schools

Interviews with school leaders suggested that the sessions had a positive impact on both the learning and conduct of the school students. During initial consultations, sexting was identified as an area of particular concern by the participating school. In the months after the sexting sessions were delivered, fewer cases of digital misconduct relating to sexting behaviours were recorded on their safeguarding database. That said, the interest in digital literacies was also motivated by the Trust's commitment to equip students for the future, a future that is understood to be digital.

We obviously talked about this the first time you came in... there was, you know, in terms of things that were trending in terms of ... our safeguarding recording. It was sexting and imagery being sent online. And now we've taken a few different approaches...that you guys have been part of that. And that's certainly a trend and it's certainly something that is quite high profile ...And in the school it has reduced the amount of cases that we've been recording (Interview with School Leaders, P2).

The project with yourselves has been really supportive in in helping us to develop and reflect on our practice and and we're also heavily invested in using research and evidence informed practice (Interview with School Leaders, P1).

.... It's [digital literacies learning] central to the curriculum ... it's providing important life skills for our students. It's really preparing them for the world of work and further education. And so I think absolutely crucial [that they are exposed

to these interventions] (Interview with School Leaders, P1).

Apps and social media platforms there's something new comes out quite regularly.... But we can't teach them about every single app and how to use each apps. It's about teaching the skill set. That means that they can work out how to use something safely (Interview with School Leaders, P2).

The project highlighted for us as well that the work that we do on parental engagement is really key to this. So it's about kind of you know education for the students. But then in a wider sense, the community and other stakeholders making sure that actually there's that need for, for staff training and that to be continually updated ...also for us to engage with parents and work with them in terms of supporting their understanding as well (Interview with School Leaders, P1).

Recommendations

Within the remit of this pilot project, we make four recommendations:

- 1. To respond to students' needs when tackling digital issues;
- 2. To design teaching activities which foreground student voice and promote meaningful dialogue;
- 3. To devote extended time to digital cultural knowledge learning that is based on reasoning and deliberative approaches;
- 4. To promote the application of digital cultural knowledge to teaching experiences through placement opportunities in Education degree programmes as a key way to develop education-related graduate attributes.

Recommendation 1:

This pilot research has shown that the teaching of critical digital literacies is complex because of the sensitive issues it may raise. The teaching and learning of critical digital literacies are further complicated because such topics appeal directly or vicariously to students' digital experiences, even when sessions are not explicitly designed with that purpose in mind. Speaking about topics such as sexting and misinformation can

therefore lead to students' feeling uncomfortable which may impact on their motivation to participate. Sensitivity surrounds such topics, because of the strong connotations these issues may have with intimacy or taboo topics, such as sexting, and/or knowledge failure (as for example, through engagement in misinformation).

As guardians of young people, educational institutions may typically focus teaching on instructing about what is deemed acceptable behaviour online. Schools may tend to adopt a preventative approach, where students are 'informed' about the issues and 'told' how to behave. This is not simply borne from the limited time dedicated to such citizenship matters in the curriculum, but also from a culture of risk management that may privilege preventative measures over developmental experiences. An alternative approach has been enacted and is recommended by the Digital Literacy Project, whereby students are encouraged to reflect on these issues themselves, through adoption of carefully designed dialogic tasks. Small adjustments to curriculum development focusing on task designs which foster reasoning and promote digital cultural knowledge can be powerful in capturing the imagination and engaging learners in meaningful ways.

Recommendation 2

The intervention designed for this project aimed to avoid a prescriptive teaching and learning approach by centering the position of students as ethical and deliberative digital beings. This was a key starting point of task-design. Sessions were designed with the following question in mind: how can we support students to become ethical digital citizens, even when others may not behave in ethical ways? This question invites discussion and consideration of different perspectives. Task design thus stressed the role of students within activities, emphasising their contributions. The sessions privileged student voice, while also encouraging them to consider the voices of others. We therefore aimed to instigate reflections about the relational aspects of digital practices and experiences, allowing students to delve into the implications of different approaches within the remit of particular digital topics. Students were thus supported to develop their own informed conclusions.

Designing critical digital literacy tasks with students' voices in mind thus became a prime objective of our project. To support this goal, each session ended with an activity that aimed to **give creative freedom to students** as both a conduit of self-expression of their newly formed ideas and as a recognisable form of participation akin to digital cultural practices. These learning outputs were designed **to help students communicate their learning**. Students' reflections have shown that the learning artifacts they developed within each session become more than simply products or outputs for them to complete; to instead represent a tangible recognition and exploration of student voice focused on complex digital topics.

In designing critical digital literacy sessions, we recommend that the following task design principles are observed and foregrounded:

 Reasoning and deliberation: creating space for discursive experiences rather than prescriptive information;

- **Ethics**: centering the student/participant as an ethical being, able to reflect upon and appreciate a moral code of digital practice;
- Creation: enabling students to externalise their learning through personal and imaginative means.

Recommendation 3

Critical digital literacy learning is becoming an ever more important need. Education needs to acknowledge the increasingly complex digital lives of students. Such acknowledgment should sign-post a duty of care, rather than a key responsibility, for schools in investing in their students' digital competencies as part of their citizenship curriculum offering. From this perspective, critical digital literacies can be conceived of as cultural knowledge within a frame of (digital) ethics, practice and citizenship. This demands time, deliberation and experience to develop digital capability. Making sense of cultural worlds where the forms and norms of engagement are either unscripted or emerging, as is the case with digital media, must be an ongoing learning endeavour. This was reflected in students' feedback, with a great majority of participants lamenting the brevity of such sessions and/or requesting follow ups. Although we are aware that such student suggestions may in part be motivated by a change in teaching and learning routines that the Durham Digital Literacy project offered, they also convey an interest in continuing exploration of such topics as an ongoing practice. This may inform curriculum planning. Adopting an encompassing understanding of digital cultural knowledge - as a form of cultural capital -would profit from a more sustained approach. Development of digital literacies, as cultural processes, benefits from time and contextualisation.

Recommendation 4

Placing University students as digital ambassadors, representing knowledgeable others, has been key to the Durham Digital Literacy project. The use of digital ambassadors as session tutors was met with a mix of surprise and excitement, appreciated as a welcome alternative to a 'teacher' -led session. Although this enthusiasm was anticipated because of the closeness in age, this became equally crucial because of the proximity in experience. The presence of digital ambassadors as session leaders helped to generate trusting environments, where students felt at ease to open up and discuss their views with each other as well as with the digital ambassadors.

The benefits of using digital ambassadors extended to the University students themselves. The Durham Digital Literacy project provided opportunities for university students to test and apply their knowledge to practice. This was welcomed as a chance to acquire valuable graduate attributes, developed outside of planned teaching and learning experiences within their degree programmes. There is an opportunity to integrate such projects within the curricula of Education degrees, as both a way to diversify the curriculum for HE students and to sustain the practices and collaborative links this type of project creates. This would help to generate a

sustainable model whereby digital ambassadors support schools to promote development of digital literacies. This could for example be achieved through a placement module that helps formalise the partnership between schools and university and/or through a volunteering scheme.

Acknowledgments

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The project received funding from ESRC IAA to conduct the work featured in this report.

Contacts and further collaborations

The researchers would be delighted to hear from teachers, students and researchers, as well as colleagues in other sectors, willing to apply or further develop this approach in their contexts of practice.

If you have used the lesson plans and/or would like to discuss the contents of the report or potential collaborations, we would like to hear from you., Please contact us at cristina.costa@durham.ac.uk and michaela.oliver@durham.ac.uk .

If you would like to translate this report and/or lesson plans to another language, please get in touch with the researchers, and we will provide the master copy.

Appendix 1-Lesson Plans

Lesson plan – Sexting

Learning process objectives:

In this session students will:

- Explore the issue of sexting from a range of perspectives;
- Create a message to represent their perspectives and understandings.

Learning outputs:

• Create a digital resource in the form of a meme representing students' own understanding of sexting and recommendations about young people's digital practices.

Time in minutes	Activity	Digital Ambassadors' role and key questions	Resources
00.00 – 00.05	Put children in groups of 2/3 Briefly introduce topic of sexting and explore current understandings of the term (and related terms e.g. nudes).	Organise groupings; Introduce topic; Q: What do you understand by the term sexting?	
00.05-	Role on the Wall: To explore motivations for engaging in sexting In groups of 2/3, students to be given a 'role on the wall' sheet. There are four different sheets to be shared among the student groups. These sheets contain an outline of a human body and represent different figures (teacher, parent, 14 year old, 18 year old). These figures are used to represent different perspectives on sexting. Each group discusses and completes role on the wall sheet from a particular perspective. The annotate sheet with examples of what their particular figure might say or think about sexting. Students complete thought and speech bubble sticky notes to represent this particular perspective (e.g. what might a 14 year old say and think about sexting?).	Facilitate the discussions and completion of the task. Q: What might a teacher/parent/14 year old/ 18 year old say and think about sexting? Do you think these perspectives will differ?	Role on the wall A3 sheets; thought and speech bubble sticky notes; pens
00.20 – 00.25	Sharing of ideas	Facilitate the discussion	
00.23	Students present to each other their discussions so that each 'role' or perspective is considered.	Q: Why do you think your figure may say or think this?	

		In what ways might	
		perspectives differ? Why	
		might this be the case?	
00.30.	Knowledge production	Facilitate the process;	Flip chart paper
00.35		provide guidance.	divided into two
			columns (possible
	Students consider discussion so far. Add to flip	Q: Based on the different	motivations for
	chart paper which is divided into two columns	perspectives we have	sexting; issues to
	with headings: 'Possible motivations to engage in	explored, what might	consider).
	sexting'; 'Issues to consider'.	some of the motivations	
		to engage in sexting be?	
		What are the issues to	
		consider?	
00.35 -	Meaning Creation	Q: What message would	Example memes.
00.50		you like to create about	
	Students to design and create meme to represent	sexting?	
	understandings/messages from previous	Why is this important?	
	discussions. Bank of example images provided	Who do you think the	
	and students create caption. Students offered	message is for?	
	space to create own image (either after	Who might it benefit?	
	annotating some example images or students can		
	choose this option from the beginning). Share		
	example meme. Remind of role on the wall and		
	flip chart ideas.		
00.50 -	Reflection		
00.55	Students to complete '2 stars and a wish'		
	reflection sheet based on their experiences in the		
	session.		
	1		

Lesson plan – Fake News and Misinformation

Learning objectives:

In this session students will:

- Explore the issue of fake news and misinformation;
- Consider strategies used within fake news;
- Create a message to represent their perspectives and understandings.

Learning outputs:

• Create a digital resource in the form of a cartoon representing students' own understanding of fake news and serving as a way to expose fake news strategies.

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Time	Activity	Digital Ambassadors' role and	Resources
		key questions	
00.00 – 00.10	Briefly introduce topic of fake news and explore understandings of the term. Real or Fake? game. Show short examples and ask to decide if real or fake (thumbs up/thumbs down). How do they know? What makes them say this?	Introduce topic; Q: What do you understand by fake news? Q: How do you know [this is real or fake]?	Example news stories
00.10 – 00.15	Put children in groups of 2/3 Diamond ranking in small groups. Give students examples of news (or broader categories). Ask them to rank according to which is most credible.	Organise groupings; Facilitate the discussions. Q: Why do you think this is most/least credible? Why?	Example news stories (printed on cards which can fit into diamond ranking grid); Diamond ranking grids (A3 or larger).
00.15- 00.30	Give children an example of fake news. Ask them to consider how they can tell it is fake, and how the creator has tried to make it believable. Digital ambassadors to support these discussions, providing terminology/vocabulary	Facilitate the discussions. Consider vocabulary. Record vocabulary as discussed.	Ipads/tablets; Examples of fake news; Flip chart paper

	to represent children's understandings (e.g. if children say they're trying to make us feel guilty – ambassadors might suggest that this is a way of bringing emotion into news etc). Look at other examples of fake news and repeat process – considering different strategies. By end of discussion, children will have considered a number of strategies.		
00.30- 00.45	Meaning Creation Remind of some main strategies used to create fake news: e.g. Impersonation, emotion, polarisation, conspiracy, discrediting and trolling. Keep these displayed. Small groups of 2/3 to choose one strategy and to create own example of fake news. For example, they might choose to create a conspiracy theory, or to discredit some information/person. Use cartoon app to create their fake news example.	Facilitate the discussion and recap. Explain and demonstrate how to use cartoon app. Share examples and take ideas for what their cartoons might contain. Support students in creating fake news.	Tablets to create cartoon. Example cartoon to share. Flipchart paper with key strategies displayed.
00.45- 00.50	Groups to pass their fake news to another table. Other groups have to work out which strategies were used.	Facilitate the discussion; Remind of key vocab (e.g. names for strategies).	Student examples; tablets
00.50 – 00.55	Reflection Students to complete '2 stars and a wish' reflection sheet based on their experiences in the session.		Reflection sheets