Creating the future of digital learning in the US

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The 2016 National Education Technology Plan has just been released in the US, and Renee Hobbs reviews some key ideas from it, discussing how it aligns with digital and media literacy education. Renee is Professor of Communication Studies and Director of the Media Education Lab, Harrington School of Communication and Media, University of Rhode Island, USA. [Header image credit: B. Flickinger, CC BY 2.0]

I'll be the first to admit that I have not been a fan of the US federal government's approach to educational technology, which is showcased every five years in an important and widely distributed report. In 2010, the *National Educational Technology (NET) Plan*, subtitled, "Learning powered by technology", was a mishmash of ideas from technology education scholars and Silicon Valley education entrepreneurs. Created by academic leaders from distinguished Ivy League education schools, it called for leveraging the learning sciences and computing technology to create engaging, relevant and personalised learning experiences.

It was all about the needs of the edtech industry and the education researchers in line for federal funding. *They* were going to create marvellous things. *They* were going to create reams of data documenting each child's keystroke and their accomplishments on "personalised" adaptive learning technologies. These things have come to pass, but without the powerful impact on learning that many had hoped for. Where were the voices, perspectives and lived experiences of teachers, students and families in all this?

So how refreshing to read the 2016 NET Plan, Future ready learning: Reimagining the role of technology in education, clearly written for a wide audience.

Create to learn

The report acknowledges that creating media is a powerful pedagogy of learning, an idea that is central to digital and media literacy. This is important:

to remain globally competitive and develop engaged citizens, our schools should weave 21st-century competencies and expertise throughout the learning experience. These include the development of critical thinking, complex problem solving, collaboration, and adding multimedia communication into the teaching of traditional academic subjects.

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Sadly, however, the terms "digital literacy" or "media literacy" aren't used, but plenty of examples demonstrate what is obviously the pedagogy of media literacy. For example, in The Journey Through Hallowed Ground, students learn about history by making videos about their visits to historical sites, taking on the roles of writers, actors, directors, producers, costume designers, music directors, editors and filmmakers.

Scaffolding student learning with moving image media

Video and moving image media has always been important to teachers, and as more and more teachers rely on YouTube as a learning resource, this is the first time the federal government has acknowledged the challenges and opportunities of video use for learning in an educational technology plan. I love the example provided in the report about Ryan Carroll at Crocker Middle School, whose sixth grade world history students had trouble learning from watching online videos.

> [N]o matter how entertaining or interesting the videos were, his students were not retaining much of the information being presented, and often they were confused about key concepts.

When the teacher discovered Zaption, he could support students' ability to learn from moving image media by "adding images, text, drawings, and questions to clarify tricky concepts and check for understanding as students watched."

The courage to teach

The 2016 NET Plan obviously benefited from the participation of teachers in its design and construction. Particularly in urban schools, it takes courage to resist the pressure of "all test-prep all the time". The work of a fourth grade teacher, Katie McKay, is described whose students explored the history of discrimination in the US by developing comic strips and videos on the topic as a way to learn. The teacher experienced pressure to perform on tests

> that were isolating and divisive … in a climate that valued silence, antiquated skills, and high-stakes testing, we engaged in peer-connected learning that highlighted 21st-century skills and made an impact on our community.

What a refreshing thing to read in a government document!

The report also praises projects where students use the power of communication and information to make a difference in the world, as they learn through creating an online community forum, public presentation or responding to a call to action. They use social networking platforms to gather information and suggestions of resources, and then draft and present their work by using animated presentation software or through multimedia formats such as videos and blogs. This work is authentic and meaningful to learners and community members alike. There is good evidence of activation of the digital and media literacy competencies of access, analyse, create, reflect and act.

Professional learning matters

The future of digital learning depends on the teachers who must begin to see themselves as curators, guides, facilitators, co-learners and motivators. The report calls for professional learning and development programmes to support and develop their identities as fluent users of technology. Our work with the URI Graduate Certificate in Digital Literacy is described on page 38, where it says,

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> A critical aspect of ensuring that young Americans learn appropriate digital literacy skills is equipping educators at all levels with the same skills. To that end, URI offers a graduate certificate in digital literacy for graduate students, classroom teachers, librarians, and college faculty.

Beware of BYOD

The 2016 NET Plan doesn't offer much evidence to support its negative position on the practice of allowing students to use their own mobile devices at school. Yes, "bring your own devices" (BYOD) practices may widen socioeconomic gaps and yes, it can be difficult for teachers to manage learning experiences and activities when they have to support multiple platforms and device types. There should be some sensitivity to the practical realities that school districts face, with enormous pressure to continually buy the fastest, latest hardware, which is simply unsustainable with current revenue models. To help support learning that transfers between learning at school and learning in the home, BYOD approaches may offer real affordances for learners. We need robust research and practical exploration to learn how BYOD approaches can support a culture of lifelong learning in and out of school.

Around the world today, parents, school leaders and policy-makers are trying to identify core values and priorities for digital literacy, responding to the diverse needs of learners. Because it is responsive to the best practices of digital learning pedagogies that embody the authentic needs of learners and teachers today, the US NET Plan is a truly useful document that will help inspire and guide us in moving forward with innovative practices to support digital and media literacy education.

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