Digital media literacy is often proposed as a solution to misinformation, but while some methods have been shown to be effective, many widely taught approaches can potentially cause harm.

It is a common refrain that students need to be taught digital media literacy in school to build resilience against misinformation. While this may be an uncontroversial statement in theory, it is ultimately meaningless when unmoored from specific practices. Indeed, the problem is not that students are not taught digital media literacy but rather that many of them are taught an assortment of outdated and untested methods that can leave them more vulnerable to misinformation and less trusting of high-quality information.

In Canada, for instance, the ability to assess online sources is a curriculum standard in every province and territory. However, in a Canada-wide study of over 2,300 students in grades 9-12, we found that students lacked the fundamental skills required to evaluate information effectively.

In perhaps the most striking example, students were shown a website from a group that presents itself as a medical research organisation but is actually a fringe anti-LGBTQI+ group that is behind a site before engaging with it. Students who once dismissed credible news stories simply because they contained typos now cross-referenced claims with professional media sources before deciding whether to believe them.

Students did not devise these strategies from nothing. As researchers at the Stanford History Education Group (SHEG) have observed, many students were simply applying what they had been taught under the guise of digital literacy. These ineffective strategies are often packaged in checklists for educators to use to teach students how to evaluate information online. Perhaps the most well-known, the CRAAP Test, can trace its lineage to tools developed in the 1990s to help librarians decide which print material to buy. It is widely used to teach digital literacy despite never having been properly evaluated in that context.

In our own study, the same 2,300 students from across Canada who initially fared so poorly demonstrated remarkable gains after completing our lateral reading program. Prior to instruction, students showed evidence of lateral reading just 11% of the time. One week following instruction, students read laterally 59% of the time, and the quality of their assessments improved dramatically as a result. Students who trusted the aforementioned anti-LGBTQI+ site simply because it had a .org domain now conducted searches to learn more about who is behind a site before engaging with it. Students who once dismissed credible news stories simply because they contained typos now cross-referenced claims with professional media sources before deciding whether to believe them.

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