EARLY LITERACY PRACTICE
More than just knowing how to read and write

Clare Wood

In this chapter I discuss how we as an adult community, concerned with supporting children’s learning, define, use and understand what literacy is, and what it looks like in the early years. Attention is paid to the impact of digital technologies on early literacy development, the tensions between school assessment and everyday reading practices as well as the disconnection between literacy in formal and informal contexts in relation to children’s writing. The key challenges brought about by technology to traditional forms of literacy result in a proposed redefinition of what we mean by reading and writing in the twenty-first century.

What do we mean by ‘literacy’?

In this chapter I will present an overview of how we understand and use the term ‘literacy’, and what the implications of these uses are for the young children whose literacy development we are seeking to study, support and assess. A re-examination of this term is necessary because of the transformation of ‘text’ that has occurred as a result of the wide ranging use of digital media to resource communication, and therefore teaching and learning. As Angela McFarlane (2014: 7) put it: ‘The long-anticipated era of ubiquitous computing has finally arrived. Predicted, lauded and longed for, the day when every learner can have a powerful computing device in their hand is here.’

Such technology affords parents and early years educators a range of new ways to engage children with text and meaning-making. However, this potential for transformation of early years practice, and the evolution of ‘digital Childhoods’, has been met with concern and discussion of how to to restrict children’s access to technology during this sensitive developmental period. But before we move too far down this route, it is helpful to remind ourselves what literacy really is, to think about how this has been broadened and deepened by increased access to technology, and to reflect on our responsibilities as adults to enable young children to become truly literate, in all senses of the word.

Literacy is more than just knowing how to read and write, although this is the way that the term is most commonly understood, and written language skills remain at the heart of
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children’s educational success and failure. However, true literacy encompasses much more. It involves the use of language more broadly, to include oral communication and comprehension skills. Literacy also includes the skilled understanding and use of ‘symbols’ more generally, and so an awareness of how to ‘read’ refers not just to the procedural ability to decode graphemes on a page or screen, but also an ability to read the intended meaning of the ‘author’. This often extends beyond the use of words on a page, but also the use of other cultural symbols, signs and gestures. Literacy, crucially, also involves the successful application of these skills. For example, someone might be able to decode a text, comprehend its meaning and write a response, but a literate individual knows how to apply these skills in a real world context to enable him or her to function successfully and behave appropriately, being sensitive to cultural norms that are relevant to that context. To be literate therefore also implies real-world, practical competence (as in the case of being ‘computer literate’, or more recently ‘digitally literate’). This is an important distinction, which flags a tension between cognitively driven definitions of what literacy is (and how it might be assessed) and how literacy functions for individuals in the context of the demands of their daily lives. Wells (2012: 2) articulates this most clearly:

For some theorists literacy can best be understood in terms of skills which are relatively context free, that is they work wherever you use them. For others, literacy needs to be understood in terms of the social practices in which it is embedded and in terms of the ideologies which sustain those practices.

Wells (2012) argues that literacy is powerful for four reasons. First, it provides literate individuals access to endless texts. Second, it permits the representation of knowledge that makes extended reasoning possible (and therefore higher reasoning and theorizing). Third, it increases human capabilities and capacities, especially with respect to cultural activity. Finally, it provides an essential foundation for other domains that are important for the development of our society, such as science and mathematics. In this way literacy is more than just a skill set or a group of activities. It is a cultural tool that permits users to engage with cultural resources, to create new ones and ultimately to transform the nature of the cultures and societies that they participate in.

Theoretically driven notions of literacy have broadened over the last 25 years in particular. For example, the New Literacy Studies movement recognized the need for multiple literacies that were necessarily situated in social, cultural and political contexts. Through this movement literacy was seen as being about meaning-making and multiple ways of knowing (Gee, 1990) and was heavily informed by social constructivist models of teaching and learning. Technology has contributed to the development of such theoretical debates (e.g. Lankshear and Knobel, 2003). In this conceptualization technology enables multiple literacies, presenting readers with multimodal texts. The New Literacy Studies movement identified a gap between cultural practices around ‘text’ in the home and those enacted in the classroom, but Maybin (2007) has also identified that literacies-in-practice can occur, where accepted and unconventional/unrecognized literacy coexist. Moreover, Merchant’s (2009) work has used the features of Web 2.0 to explore the idea that knowledge becomes socially constructed through identity and shared online cultures and practices. To participate in such activity, to make meaning, to co-construct knowledge, children need to be digitally literate. Without this, they risk becoming disenfranchised from the knowledge society.

A further philosophical approach to understanding what we mean by literacy is articulated within Multiple Literacies Theory (Cole and Masny, 2012). This Deleuzian-inspired view
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(i.e. based on the ideas of French philosopher Gilles Deleuze) attempts to map simultaneously the complexities of literacy rather than emphasizing one aspect of the construct over that of another. Moreover, according to this approach, thinking is conceptualized as experiences of becoming, rather than manipulating or reflecting on representations of knowledge. Thinking is something that happens to us rather than something that we ‘do’; we have no conscious control over it. In line with this, reading is seen as a process of becoming, and the idea of reading as interpreting and representing text is problematized (Masny, 2012). This aspect of becoming literate (that is, of becoming ourselves) and that it is ongoing and necessarily bound up with other experiences and cognitions that rupture our consciousness is something that, although more philosophically driven, is an under-articulated aspect of what becoming literate (as opposed to being literate) is about. It opens up the act of reading, and of becoming literate, to all aspects of our environmental and internal experience, past and present. The idea of some things being more conducive to effective literacy than others, or of literacy being something that adults can control or manipulate, is rejected by such notions.

My own theoretical orientation to what it means to be (or become) literate lies somewhere between these different ideological positions. As a psychologist who has studied the acquisition of reading, I have been trained in the tradition of ‘literacy’ meaning only written language skills, and the belief that these are cognitive activities and behaviours that are open to assessment, albeit imperfectly. In addition, my own stance is that literacy is multifaceted and complex in the ways described earlier, and that the digital saturation of childhood means that literacy itself is in transition. Reading and writing remains at its heart, as without these it is difficult to fully engage with multimodal texts, but clearly they do not encompass all the forms of literate experience children in the early years are now exposed to. Within this I recognize technology as affording children increased and more varied interactions with images and symbols, and that children come to interpret their interactions with ‘text’ (of whatever kind) in the context of prior contact with similar resources and activities.

Consider the following example. My daughter, between the ages of two and three years, used my smartphone to access apps which were intended to provide age-appropriate educational activity. One app presented her with a choice of story based on a familiar television series. To navigate her choice of story, she swiped her finger to the left or right to ‘turn the page’ to the next story choice. In this way she was bringing two different literate practices to bear – the experience of turning a page when faced with a ‘book’ but also the motion of swiping the screen, which is an action she recognized as valid from using the smartphone in other ways. She then tapped to select that story, and had to tap again one of two buttons, both labelled with text, to indicate whether she wanted the story to be read to her, or whether she or the adult with her would read the text. My daughter could not ‘read’ the text on these buttons in the traditional sense of the word, but she had learned through trial and error what each one meant, and knew which one to tap to access the function which was appropriate to her needs at that moment (either because she wanted to interact with the story independently or because she wanted to use the app to resource a shared interaction with an adult). Within the stories the illustrations did more than just illustrate the story; they invited the reader to participate in the events of the story in order to move it on. To interact successfully with the text, the reader had to attend to the story and map vocabulary on to the images on the screen to know how to perform the interactions that would result in the next page becoming available to view. Often the instructions regarding what to do next relied on inferences being drawn. Even in terms of simple navigation, my preschool child had to learn to associate the end of the text with the appearance of a red arrow, and to realize that the arrow meant ‘move on’. This was never provided as an explicit instruction.
I am not a digital technology evangelist, but there is clearly an art to constructing these environments with a degree of looseness which allows for self-teaching/trial and error learning, and also for shared interaction with adults or peers. One of the concerns raised around the use of digital technology is that the features that enable children to engage with it independently of adult support could result too easily in socially isolated learning. This is problematic if you believe, as I do, that making meaning from texts is based on co-construction and is necessarily socially situated. The lone child engaging with text undergoes a more impoverished experience and understanding of that text without some form of shared discourse around it. It is the responsibility of adults in the early years to model how to engage in shared interactions around such resources in the early years, when children are not yet literate enough to engage with online communities that could support collaborative learning online. As noted earlier, children approach educational technology with their prior experiences of similar resources foremost in their minds (e.g. see Wood et al., 2005). In this way, if children’s typical experience of using digital resources (or seeing them used) is solitary, or competitive rather than collaborative, then this is how they will expect to use them to resource their education experiences. This is why it is important that parents model the sharing and discussion of digital texts in their own use of such media. The tablet or smartphone should represent a hub for shared engagement and discussion of what is presented, rather than a private and personal experience of reading or other engagement. The extreme phenomenon of the hikikomori in Japan, teenagers and young adults who have retreated from human contact to engage with technology in an isolated manner, serve to remind us that if we do not draw technology into shared human spaces, it can be used to resource a completely asocial form of engagement.

The formalization of literate practices

Several threats to literacy emerge when we reflect on literacy’s position as an activity that is ‘owned’ (authenticated) by adults and educational systems. The first is that what is taught as literacy in formal contexts like primary schools and even early years settings may be narrower than what young people need to be competent in to function successfully in different arenas. The second threat to literacy is that the teaching of literacy necessarily focuses on what is assessed, which in turn reinforces the ‘need’ to teach a narrow form of literacy as some forms of literacy are easier to operationalize and quantify than others (e.g. can the child ‘read’ his/her name vs. evidence of creative engagement with language). In this way literacy is defined by what goes on in the classroom or, rather, what is taught and assessed within a curricular framework. Literate activities that fall outside of these assessed activities are less likely to be valued or prioritized, and may even be perceived as undesirable (Maybin, 2013).

Janet Maybin (2013) has examined the tensions between how reading is defined and assessed at school, and how literacy is enacted by children in behaviour that is not visible in terms of conventional literacy activities. For example, she noted that PIRLS acknowledges a broader definition of what literacy is than what is actually assessed.

If we look at the current 2016 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) assessment framework, reading is defined as follows:

Reading literacy is the ability to understand and use those written language forms required by society and/or valued by the individual. Readers can construct meaning from texts in a variety of forms. They read to learn, to participate in communities of readers in school and everyday life, and for enjoyment.

(Mullis et al. 2015: 12)
However, in the PIRLS assessment this is operationalized as reading for two purposes: reading for ‘literary experience’ and reading ‘to acquire and use information’. Comprehension processes are assessed as a child’s ability to:

- focus on and retrieve explicitly stated information;
- make straightforward inferences;
- interpret and integrate ideas and information; and
- evaluate and critique content and textual elements.

Maybin makes the point that frameworks like the PIRLS may recognize the creative, expressive and experiential aspects of reading in their definitions, but when they operationalize reading for the purposes of assessment, the range of skills under consideration and the use of resources to foster literate activity is much narrower. For example, if we look at the 2016 framework assessment, there is no operationalization of ‘participation in communities of readers’ which is identified as the third function of reading. Instead, this kind of framework ‘silences children’s voices, restricts their creativity and does not allow enough time to stimulate their imagination . . . literature is reduced to a resource for teaching the linguistic and textual features of written genre’ (2013: 60).

Maybin (2013) examined children’s spontaneous literacy activities: one in relation to children’s discussion of an episode of EastEnders (a UK serial drama) and another in relation to playful but ‘unofficial’ engagement with a poem that was the focus of a lesson at school. In both cases the children’s activity (as a result of being playful, fragmented and located in talk) is presented as activity that would been seen by the teacher as unrelated to literacy-related learning outcomes. However, Maybin’s analysis shows how these episodes of talk map on to formal understandings of literacy in terms of the PIRLS and National Curriculum definitions of literacy.

Imagination, emotional and moral engagement, critique, humour and fun are all important aspects of these children’s spontaneous responses to texts. Yet none of these dimensions of reading are easily reduced to testable items within the current assessment regime which dominates classrooms, nor are they captured in PIRLS tests or questionnaires . . . [official models of literacy] run the risk of promulgating a reductive, impoverished form of reading which fails to match up to pupils’ natural propensity and aptitude for collaborative, creative and rewarding readings of many different kinds of texts.

(p. 66)

There is a similar example of a disconnection between literacy in formal and informal contexts in relation to children’s writing, if we consider the example of children’s writing in digital contexts, such as in text messages (SMS) or on social media. In such contexts (recall ‘participation in communities of readers . . . in everyday life’ from Mullis et al., 2015) children are observed to use ‘textisms’ – a form of digital slang that uses alternative spellings and punctuation conventions (e.g. see Wood, Meacham et al., 2011; Wood et al., 2014). The majority of textisms are phonetic in nature (e.g. c u 2nite), and research has shown that there is no negative relationship between writing in this way and the children’s understanding of conventional spelling or grammar (Wood, Meacham et al., 2011; Wood et al., 2014). In fact, the data suggest that textism use may be supporting children’s spelling development (Wood, Meacham et al., 2011; Wood, Jackson Hart et al., 2011). However,
children’s informal digital writing is rejected as a form of legitimate literate practice, and is characterized as damaging both for the individual child (see Woronoff, 2007) and language itself (Humphries, 2007).

The way in which literate behaviour is quantified and assessed seems to drive what is valued in terms of children’s literate experiences. Although the Maybin example was focused on primary school children aged 10–11 years, and the texting research has similarly examined children aged 8 years or older, the principles of Maybin’s argument remain applicable to early years domains. To illustrate this, Figure 5.1 summarizes the impact of operationalizing literacy for assessment purposes on our functional understanding of what literacy ‘is’ in early years settings.

In the top box of Figure 5.1 I have selected the Marsh and Hallet (2008) definition of what literacy curriculum provision should encompass as an example of one that explicitly recognizes the wider context and purpose of literacy. Below this are the behavioural indicators of progress that are provided to UK early years practitioners to help them to understand what this might look like if children are making ‘expected’ progress for their age (Early Education, 2012).

I have focused on the expected behaviours for reading and writing, as the Early Years Foundation Stage framework defines literacy as reading and writing. Language and communication (speaking and listening) are presented as separate from ‘literacy’, as are ‘understanding the world’ and ‘expressive arts and design’. Some reference is made to technology in relation to understanding the world, and expressive arts, but it is notable that engagement with such tools is not linked to ‘traditional’ literate practices in the behavioural milestones listed.

In the final box for Figure 5.1, we can see how this narrowly defined list of behavioural indicators is further reduced to the achievement of assessment targets at around the age of five years. These targets further focus the achievement of literate activity in the early years as ‘reading as decoding and comprehending simple text’ and writing as the application of phonics rules to generate attempts at writing that although inaccurate, should be understandable. No mention is made of other forms of symbolic understanding or use. The contribution of others in literate interactions is restricted to being a marker of how successfully the child has managed to write a sentence, or a faceless target for a child to re-tell a story to. There is no mention of collaborative communication or extra-curricular/home practices.

**Does technology impact early literacy learning?**

Hsin et al. (2014) conducted a systematic review of the literature published between 2003 and 2013 that examined the impact of technology on children’s learning. From this they noted that the available data on the influence of technology on children’s learning in relation to language and literacy was ambivalent: 26 studies showed a positive impact, only one showed a negative impact, 16 observed no influence and a further 32 fell into the category of ‘it depends’. They identified a number of factors that influenced whether or not children’s learning was influenced by technology use. They noted that effects were generally better for older rather than younger children, but also that the children’s prior knowledge and use of a computer in the home could impact what they learned. Prior knowledge of the domain under instruction was a double-edged sword. That is, Levy (2009) observed that children’s prior exposure to reading activities as reading print books constrained children’s ability to read multimodal computer texts. We also saw this in some of our own research, where there was evidence of children importing linear reading practices in their use of talking books which had embedded activities (Wood, 2005). The review noted that the more time spent using an intervention involving talking books, the better the outcomes.
Figure 5.1 Understandings of literacy in early years education

**Definition – The Spirit of Early Years Literacy**

... offer a broad and rich language and literary curriculum to young children, the importance of recognizing literacy as a social and cultural practice, and, thus, ensure curricular links to the wider world and the need to engage children as active participants in

**‘Expected’ Literacy Behaviours** (taken from Early Education, 2012)

**Birth to 11 months**

Enjoys looking at books and other printed material with familiar people.

**8–20 months**

Handles books and printed material with interest.

**16–26 months**

Interested in books and rhymes and may have favourites.

**22–36 months**

Has some favourite stories, rhymes, songs, poems or jingles. • Repeats words or phrases from familiar stories. • Fills in the missing word or phrase in a known rhyme, story or game, e.g. ‘Humpty Dumpty sat on a ...’. Distinguishes between the different marks they make.

**30–50 months**

Enjoys rhyming and rhythmic activities. • Shows awareness of rhyme and alliteration. • Recognizes rhythm in spoken words. • Listens to and joins in with stories and poems, one-to-one and also in small groups. • Joins in with repeated refrains and anticipates key events and phrases in rhymes and stories. • Beginning to be aware of the way stories are structured. • Suggests how the story might end. • Listens to stories with increasing attention and recall. • Describes main story settings, events and principal characters. • Shows interest in illustrations and print in books and print in the environment. • Recognizes familiar words and signs such as own name and advertising logos. • Looks at books independently. • Handles books carefully. • Knows information can be relayed in the form of print. • Holds books the correct way up and turns pages. • Knows that print carries meaning and, in English, is read from left to right and top.

**Assessment Targets**

*(Early Years Foundation Stage Statutory Early Learning Goals, to be achieved by age 5 years)*

**Reading:** children read and understand simple sentences. They use phonic knowledge to decode regular words and read them aloud accurately. They also read some common irregular words. They demonstrate understanding when talking with others about what they have read.

**Writing:** children use their phonic knowledge to write words in ways which match their spoken sounds. They also write some irregular common words. They write simple sentences which can be read by themselves and others. Some words are spelt correctly and others are phonetically plausible.
Overall the Hsin et al. (2014) review does not paint technology use as a threat, but its benefits are often context-driven, and are greater for older children. Taken together this evidence could suggest that perhaps early years educators should continue with a focus on traditional literate experiences and leave the development of digitally mediated engagement with texts for the school years. However, to agree with this interpretation is to focus on the construction of digital media as something which needs to ‘outperform’ traditional literacy resources before it can be considered to have value. To do this is to ignore the everyday context in which children are growing up. In the home, the early years of children are now digitally saturated – even in low-income homes the presence of digital media can be observed (Ofcom, 2012, 2015). The question should not be ‘Is this better than a traditional approach to resourcing literate activity?’, but ‘Does this way of resourcing literate activity represent a threat or an opportunity?’ The evidence would suggest that digital media do represent a pervasive feature of contemporary childhood that can be used to resource literacy in positive ways just as traditional print media can. There does, however, appear to be a mismatch between home literacy practices that can and do include the full range of texts, and how literacy is enacted in early years settings.

The challenges

Parents are advised to restrict children’s screen time, to be on their guard regarding the threats posed by digital media as a key component of ‘toxic childhood’ (Palmer, 2006). The emphasis on threat limits an awareness of the affordances of technology.

Adults can feel threatened by children’s use of digital media and technology because it enables and it is ‘democratic’: that is, digital media allow children to communicate their own messages in their own way. This might be through the use of images, or in older children through being able to write using an orthographic system of their own collective design (textspeak, see Plester et al. 2009; Wood et al., 2011; Wood et al., 2014 for examples). In this world, adults are not required to determine or authenticate the ‘correct’ response: it is a creative domain in which children can assume the role of storyteller before they can write. Or as Ohler (2013: 4) has put it: ‘The digital revolution in a sentence: finally, we all get to tell our own story in our own way.’

The beauty of this for parents and early years practitioners is that children from a very young age are facilitated by such technology to participate in literate practices in a more developed way than ever before. In particular, they can author ‘texts’ long before they are able to form letters with a pen or spell words. As Kucirkova et al. (2014) have shown, both story-book and ‘non-literacy’ related apps afford young children opportunities for educationally meaningful talk, joint problem-solving and collaborative activity.

Technology is a resource like any other: books, pictures, pens, audio, video or language. Like all resources, on their own they deliver potential learning but the resource itself does not instruct. A book does not teach the child to read. The picture does not convey meaning or experiences. Pens do not write. Computers do not harm or facilitate learning as a function of their sophistication. Televisions do not educate or reduce IQs by their mere existence. It is how they are used to resource literacy that is critical. The issue is that digital media, by virtue of its increased interactivity and design features, enables a level of independent use by children which traditional print resources struggle to achieve. As noted earlier, if children come to observe and experience the use of digital resources as highly personalized and individualized (see Chapter 3 in this book) then this is how they will come to use them as a literacy resource. To unlock their potential they need to be the focus of joint attention.
and shared experience. Literacy is about communication and language, and communication and language are about interaction and shared understandings. It is not about books or pens any more than it is about computers and smartphones. It is about how these technologies are used and shared, how communities see them as resources.

Adults can construct digital technologies as problematic for resourcing literacy, but why? This concern may be a valid one if the early years practitioner (or parent) lacks confidence about how to interact around these resources. Is it not the technology that is the problem, but the lack of cultural practices regarding how and when to share technology with children. We have well-established cultural practices around shared book reading and a general appreciation of its importance for literacy development. We do not yet have a common set of practices regarding how to share digital texts in the same way. This is evident from the recent responses to the National Literacy Trust Early Years Survey (Formby, 2014), which also found that only 23.7 per cent of early years practitioners thought that there was a place for touch-screen technology in early years settings, and there was higher incidence of this attitude in early years settings that had been evaluated as ‘outstanding’ in relation to settings where provision was seen as suboptimal. The value of digitally mediated literacy may be perceived to be lower in contexts where there is less of an imperative to engage with it.

Technology aside, the other issue that arises from the valuing of some forms of literacy over others is that adults and professionals who care for preschool children may limit the range of activities that are shared with children, or fail to include them in relatively mundane or informal activities, because they do not look like conventional forms. In a world that is saturated in print, and where the means to create narratives through a range of media are commonplace, the notion of ‘basic literacy skills’ strips culture, colour and confidence from our children’s earliest experiences of ‘text’.

**Re-defining literacy**

What is my definition of literacy? It is this:

Knowledge and understanding of the literal and intended meanings of cultural symbols and tools which convey meaning, and the ability to make practical and creative use of these symbolic forms to communicate effectively in the widest range of settings and contexts: both synchronous and asynchronous, face-to-face and virtual.

This is broad, but is open to thoughtful practical operationalization. It encompasses letter-sound knowledge and print-based engagement without privileging that form of communication over the other options. It flags the application and purpose of literacy as well as its processes. In many ways, this definition is not a radical departure from those that have been expressed before. The challenge, however, is to keep the spirit of this definition central to the way in which assessment frameworks for early years practitioners, and developmental milestones for parents, are articulated.

**References**


