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DIGITAL LITERACY/‘DYNAMIC LITERACIES’

Formal and Informal Learning Now and in the Emergent Future

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Thinking About Literacy and the Push and Pull of Pedagogy

Whilst many younger learners, across all levels of income and social class in the UK and elsewhere in the developed and parts of the majority world, are immersed in various media- and technology-related games and activities outside of formal learning (OFCOM, 2018), the institutional situation is often different. It is not especially surprising that this is so; earlier research in the UK found that children of primary school age hardly expected anything else when crossing the boundary between home and school (Selwyn, Potter, & Cranmer, 2010). After all, many routine aspects of life in the home are not replicated in school, which is, of course, bound by different rules and norms and generates a different learned way of being. In fact, the children participating in this research cast doubt on the proposition that formal educational settings could learn anything from informal uses of media and technology in the home.

All-pervasive use of technology, its ease of access across social and broadcast media, its various screens and various modalities of use, from passive interaction to touchscreen dragging and dropping, from consumption to production and sharing of meanings, raises the possibility of a greater disjuncture between the spaces of home and school. Pervasiveness has shifted the goalposts and media technologies are integral to, and embedded in, material culture and lived experience. In some education systems, a failure to recognise and build on this vast untapped well of skill and knowledge about media outside the school unnecessarily reduces the experience of what it is to be literate inside the school. Children being educated therein lack a critical engagement with media forms, never mind the experience to be creative and produce digital media. Of course, concerns about safety rightly drive many initiatives but, even with this agenda, digital literacy projects are still very unevenly spread in the developed and developing world, in spite of the efforts of international organisations to provide blueprints for formal engagement (UNESCO, 2016) and the way in which children experience digital media in the world outside is, like that of adults, not necessarily always on a simple risk–benefit continuum.

At the same time, education systems are increasingly dependent on an unseen but vast commercially enabled and profitable data collection project on aspects of children’s learning and, increasingly, dispositions and behaviours across a range of metrics (Bradbury, 2019; Bradbury &
Roberts-Holmes, 2017; Williamson, 2017). Whilst qualitative researchers, both inside and outside formal institutions, need to provide evidence of ethical management of any data collected, including gaining informed consent from the subjects, it is not always clear that the same permissions are agentively given in respect of the compilation of league tables of achievement, and other less well understood datapoints by large corporations. Additionally, of course, by reducing literacy to simple, measurable targets and collecting data in this way, it is possible to reduce education to a functional process, disconnected from the world, its messy issues and political concerns, its inequity and lack of social justice.

Before continuing, it is necessary to think, therefore, about what it really means to be literate in the digital age, since how this is defined exerts a forceful push and pull on pedagogy. This suggests considering the formal development of ‘literacy’ as an object of study, which, in turn, means working with theoretical positions and definitions which locate literacy in its wider cultural context; a positioning which focuses attention on different phenomena than versions which arise from information science or communication studies. Arguably the most useful starting point, when considering questions of context, is Brian Street’s version of the “new literacy studies”, in which literacy has two overarching forms: the autonomous and the ideological (Street, 2003). In the former case, literacy by itself acts autonomously and confers status and success in the world; acquiring the functional codes and conventions is all that is required. It is, of course, inarguable that children who learn to read and write print are massively advantaged over those who do not. But literacy in the ‘ideological’ sense is a far closer definition of how literacy works in the world, because meaning-making is, ultimately, contingent and contested. It is located in literacy events and speech acts which are constructed out of particular sets of specific rules of engagement and communicative modes and its design across these many modes, in particular those other than print, now hold sway in the digital age. It is an unambitious literacy curriculum which does not consider enlarging itself better to encompass media. Note that this is not about replacing print or subverting its importance in formal and informal learning – far from it. Children and adults are arguably reading more than ever before and these skills are still vitally important for functioning in the world. It is, however, about being more ambitious with what the curriculum offers for all ages, encouraging children to become more engaged with the many modes of meaning-making in the digital age. It is about engaging in teaching and learning which recognises that meaning-making is in a more or less constant state of change and churn; it is dynamic and not static, and it is multimodal, dependent on knowledge and skills of intertextuality and of how different modes work with each other to produce meaning.

**Digital Literacy and Media Literacy**

The word ‘literacy’ confers status on everything that comes before it. Its position as inarguable and a static force for good in the autonomous definition of the word signifies a serious and structured discipline. So, ‘digital literacy’ as a term promises a structured and instrumentalist version of the ‘digital’, one which fixes its sights on skills and technical operations, the awareness of codes and conventions. It does not catch the lived experience of the digital, the pervasive use of media devices, the cultural experience of sharing, critiquing, collecting and distributing, remediating and remixing. It fails to capture the messy reality of everyday life in the first quarter of the 21st century, with its attendant baggage from previous times and its insistence on an endlessly deferred future in which things inevitably get better, thanks mainly to technology. One thing is certain, things get more complex, because ‘things’ are in a constant state of flux in which the changing artefacts of new media are inextricably bound up with the different social arrangements which arise in the light of these and the subsequent altered social practices around them (Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2006).
If digital literacy is perhaps perceived as too reductive, will media literacy help as a term around which to frame thinking about learning in the digital age? Certainly, it has a longer history and there are traditions of media literacy education in countries such as Canada and the United States, and parts of Europe, which go back decades. But even with media literacy there is significant dissonance between programmes which seek to develop skillsets and those which require deeper analytical and political readings of media literacy texts, artefacts, and institutions. If digital literacy promotes safety through the understanding of codes and conventions, including some technical knowledge of the digital world, perhaps media literacy is its sibling which touches in part on citizen safety but takes its positioning from understanding the political manipulation of information, its role in hegemony. In some initiatives, and to some degree with accuracy, media literacy is portrayed as the solution to the problem of ‘fake news’. But media literacy is more than this and is centrally concerned with skillsets of media analysis and production every bit as much as it is with distribution, with issues of interpretation, with economic and societal change.

‘Dynamic Literacies’ and Pedagogy

Digital literacy and media literacy are only two of the literacy labels which are part of the past, present, and children’s emergent future. Could one see them, and other related labels such as ‘multimodal literacy’, ‘information literacy’, as subsets of an ‘overarching set of ‘dynamic literacies’ with distinct traditions which, nevertheless, frame a genuine attempt to account for the changes to the ways in which meaning is made in the world” (Potter & McDougall, 2017, p. 33)? ‘Dynamic’ used as a signifier in this way allows us to pay attention more closely, more responsively, to the lived experience of digital media. It does not privilege the textual over the socio-cultural or even affective nature of meaning-making; it is an inclusive term which resists the residual definition of literacy as it relates to screens and media (which can lead to media being seen as everything else that gets done when the real business of working with print is finished). It brings theories together in a broader collection of concepts.

In what way might this be a useful way to think about children and their learning, now and in the emergent future? Well, it was noted in the opening section that the way in which a system defines literacy exerts a powerful push and pull on pedagogy in that system. If a narrow definition of literacy is employed, a narrow pedagogical response is generated, particularly if, as in the case of the UK, you have an assessment-dominated curriculum backed by punitive database-driven inspection. On the other hand, if you employ a dynamic definition of literacy, you potentially generate a more responsive pedagogy, attuned to the lived experience of children as they grow up in a media-pervasive world.

For researchers working in the field of digital media, culture, and education, approaching the world with particular frames of reference derived from the various literacies above, the important questions are around how to account for what is encountered. What is the best way to research the messy reality (Law, 2004) of the world as it relates to the texts, practices, and social arrangements of the digital media age? Researchers of children’s emergent literacies should arguably aim to represent something from these messy realities in their narratives: the situated nature of classroom technologies and interactions with media texts and artefacts. This is work which is increasingly captured and theorised as the ‘messy’ and ‘baroque complexity’ of the interaction between objects, bodies, technologies, curriculum arrangements, and more in recent writing and research (see, for example, Burnett, Davies, Merchant, & Rowsell, 2014; Burnett & Merchant, 2014).

There are further large-scale efforts to focus research and dissemination in the field in the context of even younger children’s engagement with these issues within an overarching frame of curiosity about the lived experience of the digital for those aged from birth to eight years. The “DigiLitEY European COST action brings researchers together to share research into digital
literacy in homes and communities, settings of formal and informal learning, reading and writing onscreen, online and offline practices and new methodologies” (DigiLitEY, 2018). It runs in parallel with another multinational project which explores much of the same territory with a focus on digital ‘making’ in the early years (MakEY, 2018). This inclusive definition which embraces making alongside the digital and media arts is a marker of the ways in which the understanding of what it means to be literate is currently shifting some of the research agenda in new literacy studies and beyond. Certainly, it provides a more holistic and tempered view than commentary which seeks to generate panic about the ‘effects’ of screen media on children and young people, positioning them instead as agentive and active users of new technologies. From some of the same authors and researchers, parallel reports and opinion pieces have created nuanced accounts of what it means to be a parent or carer in this context, moving the debates beyond the risk–safety continuum and driven by three key questions: “how do parents seek to bring up their children in the digital age?” “what is parents’ vision of their children’s future and that of wider society?” and “what risks and opportunities will characterise the digital future?” (LSE, 2018). In all these cases, the enlarged definition of literacy prevails, moving beyond the functional, reductive codes and conventions which might be connoted by the term ‘digital literacy’. Similarly, the engagement with the changing nature of meaning-making which has been captured in recent years by the various researchers and writers in the new literacies domain has moved the debate into a more dynamic engagement with the digital in this context and several writers and researchers have led the way in this (Burnett, 2016; Gee, 2015; Gillen, 2014; Marsh, 2004; Pahl, 2006; Rowsell, 2013). They have developed further the work of the earliest scholars of the new literacy studies and ‘multiliteracies’, the work of the New London group, introducing to the world the notion of a plethora of literacy forms and functions in a changing world, rooted in an engagement with the turn to the visual, social semiotics, multimodality, and more (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Kress, 2003), recently updated and remixed in new configurations (Serafini & Gee, 2017).

Researching Third Spaces

What does this multiply-placed vision of literacy as a dynamic force imply for teachers, researchers, and academics on the ground at this point, in many parts of the world, in many situations, attempting to operationalise some of these concepts in their broader engagement with the world, in their attempt to work with ‘digital literacy’ as an idea, or even to introduce new terms, concepts, and even policies appropriate to the dynamic state of literacy(ies)? It implies having frameworks for research which are responsive at a deep level to the changing nature of meaning-making and also of hierarchies in the context of digital literacy. In so doing it becomes important to think about the spaces and locations of the digital. Where is this engagement possible within and between formal/informal boundaries of learning? Some have invoked the ‘third space’ as a useful concept for this (Gutierrez, 2008), though it generates misunderstandings and misapplications of the term. Nevertheless, it can work in the context of children now and in the emergent digital future, if it is understood as not always an actual, physical space, but more as a space in which hierarchies are flattened and practices adapted beyond the original conception in culture (Bhabha, 1994) into educational space in the context of all-pervasive uses of digital technologies (Potter & McDougall, 2017, see especially pp. 37–60).

For those of us working and researching in the spaces between formal and informal education these third spaces are potential locations for observing a dynamic conception of literacy in action. It becomes something more than a discursive account of digital literacy practices. It is realised and acted out in the world in such activities as filmmaking, animation, gaming, augmented and virtual reality in a range of settings. But it depends fundamentally on a working relationship
between two key aspects of pedagogy: the roles of the various social actors in the setting and the negotiation into the space of popular culture or vernacular literacies, the welcoming into the space of children’s funds of knowledge, their skills and dispositions from outside across the semi-permeable membrane between home and school (Marsh, 2004; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Pahl, 2003; Parry, 2013; Potter, 2011).

Three exemplar projects might be useful at this point. The first examines the impacts of the use of culturally familiar devices such as touch screens in the teaching of filmmaking and moving image grammar. This work comprised a series of observations, interviews, and focus groups over the course of a project which lasted for one school term, with a group of 20 children aged 9 and 10, as well as a similar number of 14-year-olds. In the participating schools, the data showed clear impact on practices around filmmaking and editing, with the affordances of immediate review and iterative filmmaking by the children a real possibility, without the encumbrances of other kinds of technical filmmaking equipment. In this case the “culturally familiar artefact represented an opportunity for boundary crossing between formal and informal settings of education” (Potter & Bryer, 2016, p. 124). The artefact itself was part of the process, the descriptions of its use and those of the children playing a part in describing what has been referred to elsewhere as the ‘Baroque complexity’ of interactions in educational settings in and around social actors and technology (Burnett & Merchant, 2014). The research noted also its centrality in the creative process, a key component of digital media education (Cannon, 2018), and its findings were broadly in line with how touchscreen devices had previously been found to be potentially useful in many early literacy activities (see, for example, Flewitt, Kucirkova, & Messer, 2014), though the study reported here was working in the expanded and inclusive definition of literacy, beyond print and into meaning-making with digital moving-image production.

The second project, in an out-of-school setting, employing similar methods to those described above, worked with similar-aged groups of children in different project locations (see Flewitt et al., 2017). In this research the interest was in finding out how children’s experiences of material disadvantage could be represented by the child co-researchers, using digital artefacts, voice recorders, media production, audio recordings, alongside pencil and paper methods. These were embedded within discussions of lived experience and ideas of representation drawn from popular culture as well as personal accounts. Across the range of documentary-style productions, in the child-produced videos (in one setting a horror film and also a dance movie), there were flattened hierarchies of adults and children in the setting, the positioning of children as expert reporters of their own experience, and the emergence of thinking and working in a ‘third space’ (Gutierrez, 2008; Potter & McDougall, 2017), the connection between texts, artefacts, and practices adding up to an emergent negotiation with existing skills and dispositions which the children employed in a fresh, revelatory context.

Finally, a current project is working with children in two primary schools to find out more about their playground games (Playing the Archive, 2018). The project, like an earlier iteration (Burn & Richards, 2014), has its origins in the games collected by folklorists Peter and Iona Opie over a period of some 30 years (Opie & Opie, 1954). In this version, children have been recruited as co-researchers of their playground experiences of play with a view to casting new light on the collection and, ultimately, helping to represent it to new audiences in digitally enhanced museum exhibits and play trails. This research is using innovative research methods, including thinking about embodied literacy and movement through space enabled by new thinking on multimodal transcription (Cowan & Kress, 2017). In the early stages of the project it became clear how much YouTube takes centre stage in the playground as the main media space to be represented and remediated. Children profess admiration for YouTubers and a desire to have their own followers; one ten-year-old who was interviewed already has her own. This active engagement with the vast swathes of content on YouTube results in playground games
becoming inflected with the performance of their idols among the YouTubers. Dances from current crazes are performed and enacted within the template of earlier games from times gone by. Just as the Opies found in their work and just as colleagues on the earlier project found, popular culture is remixed into play (Willett, 2014). In this most recent case, the provisional world of social media is the anchor for play which finds roots and echoes in much earlier rhyming patterns and clapping games. This research is at the beginning stages of understanding and theorising these phenomena but there are parallels with the earlier projects which reported on the ways in which dynamic literacies are operating.

YouTube is inevitably at the heart of the viewing experience of children who have access to tablets and smartphones which are present in a variety of forms and different levels of use in many homes in the UK. The point here, again, is to state that adults, like children, are in thrall to a platform which reaches into most aspects of their lives, viewing YouTubers, TV shows, recorded gameplay, self-help clips, and more. From a video-sharing platform, it has grown into a central, first port-of-call for many searches for media, entertainment, and information. In terms of lived experience, it acts as a kind of ecosystem in its relationship to both playful engagements with media and an interaction with the dynamic of digital life. Dances from Instagram have moved across into online video gameplay, via the medium of YouTube, back out into the physical, offline world of the playground. Children are running around as much as they ever were during these minutes in between lessons and their play is a rich engagement with digital culture. To what extent they are agentively, actively curating their play – as in the previous project (Potter, 2014) – back into the world leads us to a wider discussion of exactly which elements might be components of ‘digital literacy’.

**Digital Lives, Agency, and Curation: Components of Digital Literacy**

This chapter presents a mostly positive interpretation of children and young people’s ability to act for themselves in the world in the digital age, whilst much contemporary discourse assumes that there are dire consequences of digital media use in terms of screen addiction, danger from strangers, and more. Many of these fears are exaggerated, some are evidently not, and there are excellent resources for educating in a nuanced and research-led way about them, including culturally sensitive, detailed, and expanded datasets and reports from across the European Union (Sonck, Livingstone, Kuiper, & de Haan, 2011).

Some of the less obvious forces which act on children’s agency are arguably even more present in their lives than those traditionally associated with risk; those corporations quietly accruing information about their subjects under the guise of educational assessment and improvement. Children’s attainments, and even behavioural actions in the world, are recorded digitally and stored as assets by companies and agencies, some of whom are engaged in profiting from such profiling (Williamson, 2017). However, in this, children should not necessarily be ‘othered’ as unknowing victims with adults positioned as their knowing guardians; adults are also prey to ignorance of the same levels of surveillance and data ‘sharing’ in which the notion of consent is a very loose conception of the term. Without serious time and effort, for example, it is not a simple process for adults of any age to erase purchases, browsing histories, uploaded social media files, emails, and more which accrue through (digital) life.

Children’s use of social media as it grows, moves over time from perhaps being the object of other people’s gaze at the behest of parents and carers sharing images, to becoming producers of their own content, curators of their own exhibitions of their achievements, likes, collected items, and more. Younger learners can add to their profile the data they give away to that which is collected without consent. In many senses this curatorial process is agentive and positive, a part of participatory culture which is playful and under the control of the end user.
Behind it, of course, lie corporations framing the ways in which the media can and should be shared and controlling both the access, storage, and ultimate purposes of the productions. Social media production is also as complex as it is ‘playful’ and ‘agentive’, framed differently across the many spaces in which the images, videos, and audio files are published and displayed. Each space has its own rules, logic, affordances, and audiences; there is a particular grammar and syntax associated with each one of them from Instagram to Twitter, WhatsApp to WeChat, Facebook to WordPress. The author has suggested elsewhere that ‘curation’ is in itself a new literacy practice in digital media and ‘curatorship’ is the ability to navigate these processes. It is way beyond the simple act of editing and conflates many different skillsets and dispositions across performance, exhibition, reflexivity, performativity, and more (Potter, 2012; Potter & McDougall, 2017). In keeping with the notion of an enlarged definition of what it means to be literate, encompassing the making and sharing of meanings in a wider form of media than print, it would be useful in years to come to think about ‘curation’ itself becoming part of what these children learn about. In England, where it has become important for children to know what the term ‘fronted adverbial’ means, it is surely as important for them to understand curation in digital media.

In conclusion, it is arguably important to consider a set of useful and usable component parts of ‘digital literacy’ which somehow capture the present and emergent state of play for children, young people, and their carers living with media and technology which is all pervasive and ever changing. The following could be useful, potential locations of research and thinking also about ‘dynamic literacies’, the knowledge domains which acknowledge four key facets of the lived experience of both children and their parents and carers in the digital age:

1 Technology as part of material culture and lived experience;
2 Digital media and learner identity as bound and contingent on one another;
3 Literacy in the digital age recognised as a dynamic phenomenon, inclusively and ideologically defined;

and, finally,

4 Curation as a new literacy practice (with all its attendant contradictions around agency and control).

Researchers might begin to do better by all social actors in the field by paying attention to the detail of people’s lives in the digital age and not being fixated on static, reductive systems which miss the detail of the lived experience of children of all ages. The emergent future may well be one in which technologies such as Artificial Intelligence will have a decisive impact on all aspects of life and learning, and there is much debate and hype around this at the time of writing, but the critical considerations around the digital, around media, remain the same, even as the technology is evolving. Thinking about this and living with it is about thinking beyond the technology (Buckingham, 2007) into the processes of digital media consumption and production, examining the structures around them, holding larger education technology businesses to account and thinking about the ethical and moral considerations of this rise of a particular form of ‘learning analytics’. It is important also to be very clear that more is involved than a reductive, technicist notion at the level of the individual child and their family if researchers are going to agree on using ‘digital literacy’ as a label, as a subject around which to focus debate. One argument elsewhere (Potter & McDougall, 2017) has been that labelling like this inevitably underlines unreal divisions in the locus of investigation and debate with other domains, such as ‘media literacy’. The term ‘dynamic’ in relation to literacy appears to offer more in terms of keeping in play
the notion of churn and change and anchoring that with the ever-constant need to make meaning in the world anchored by the use of the word ‘literacies’ after it. It needs to be a key component of what is understood when talking about ‘digital literacy’.

References


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