ELINET
Position Paper
on Digital Literacy

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1. The ELINET definition of Digital Literacy

The centrality and ubiquity of digital devices in contemporary life has led to profound changes in literacy practices at home, school, work and play. Literacy now includes the use of a range of meaning-making resources, and manipulation of multiple modalities in diverse media devices. Based on the body of research that has emerged in recent years around Digital Literacy, which encompasses concepts such as Information Literacies, 21st Century Literacy, Multimodal Literacies, Multiliteracies and New Media Literacy, the ELINET network proposes the following definition of Digital Literacy:

Digital Literacy is a broad term used to describe three interrelated dimensions of literate practice in the contemporary age[1]:

1. **the operational dimension** includes the skills and competences that enable individuals to read and write in diverse digital media (including making meaning with and from diverse modes such as spoken and written language, static and moving images, sounds, screen design etc.);

2. **the cultural dimension** refers to developing a repertoire of digital literacy practices in specific social and cultural contexts (such as constructing and/or maintaining effective social, educational and/or professional relationships online);

3. **the critical dimension** recognises that meaning-making resources are selective and operate as a means of social control (e.g. knowing what Facebook is up to when it reminds you that your profile is not complete). Becoming critically literate with digital media therefore includes not simply participating competently in digital literacy practices but also developing the ability to transform them actively and creatively.

This definition of the dynamic processes involved in developing digital literacy is enriched by the following considerations:

- **Digital Literacy is transversal to many different activities**: it is about making "confident, critical and creative use of diverse digital devices to achieve goals related to work, employability, learning, leisure, inclusion and/or participation in society"[2].

- **Digital Literacy is part of everyday literacy**: that is to say, it can be viewed as both similar to and different from traditional literacy. To read and write digitally, students and teachers must learn to create and interpret texts in diverse modes (such as static and moving images and icons, spoken and written language, screen layout etc.), and to navigate texts across diverse digital platforms which offer a variety of learning opportunities, formats for creation, and spaces for expression that were not previously available[3].

- **Digital Literacy is a complex and socio-culturally sensitive issue:** it is much more than the capacity to use ICT tools, but should be regarded as a set of social and sense-making competences associated with interacting with a range of digital devices, where the central issue is about the diverse literacies needed to communicate and collaborate with others and to find and make sense of the available information[4].

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[1] Adapted from Green, B. (1988) Subject-specific literacy and school learning: a focus on writing, Australian Journal of Education 32 (2), 156-179 and Green, B. and Beavis (2012) Literacy in 3D: An Integrated Perspective in Theory and Practice. Australian Council Educational Research (ACER) and Sefton-Green, J., Marsh, J., Erstad, O., and Flewitt, R. (2016) Establishing a Research Agenda for the Digital Literacy Practices of Young Children: A White Paper for COST Action IS1410.

[2] Ala-Mutka, K. (2012). Mapping digital competence: towards a conceptual understanding. IPTS, Seville.

[3] Chase, Z. & Laufenberg, D. (2011). Embracing the Squishiness of Digital Literacy, Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy 54(7).

[4] Lankshear, C. and Knobel, M. (2008). Digital Literacies: Concepts, Policies and Practices. Peter Lang, New York.

2. From Digital Competence to Digital Literacy

In 2006, the European Parliament and the European Council recognized Digital Competence as one of the eight key competences that every European citizen should master[5], alongside communication in one's mother tongue; communication in a foreign language; mathematical competence; competences in science and technology; learning to learn; social competences; entrepreneurship and cultural awareness. It was also classed with language, literacy and numeracy as one of the four foundational skills for learning. More recently, in 2011 the European Commission launched a project called DIGCOMP to develop a Digital Competence Framework, which resulted in May 2014 in a proposal for a taxonomy of Digital Competences for all citizens[6]. Eurostat is gathering robust statistical data to enable it to publish a composite indicator for Digital Literacy[7]. Beyond this, further, more detailed work will be undertaken in 2015, including: definition of indicators for the "safety" domain, review of the framework on a regular basis regarding updated skills/competence needs, identification of the digital skills requirements of different jobs and expansion of the survey of schools on ICT in education on problem-solving[8].

Clearly, equipping European citizens with digital competences is at the core of the EU strategy, and progress is being made. Furthermore, enhancing Digital Literacy is one of seven pillars in the European Commission's 2010 Digital Agenda for Europe. However, ELINET believes that the focus should move from Digital Competence to Digital Literacy, and that a clear distinction between the two concepts should be made, in policy as well as in practice. The two concepts are sometimes used interchangeably, as in this definition by Eurostat: "Digital literacy refers to the skills required to achieve digital competence, the confident and critical use of information and communication technology (ICT) for work, leisure, learning and communication[9]". ELINET advocates for a holistic view of Digital Literacy that goes well beyond the capacity to use ICT devices, in line with the approach by JISC in the UK: "Digital literacy looks beyond functional IT skills to describe a richer set of digital behaviours, practices and identities[10]".

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[5] http://ec.europa.eu/digital-agenda/en/news/measuring-digital-skills-across-eu-eu-wide-indicators-digital-competence.
[6] http://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC83167
[7] http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:Digital_literacy&oldid=61399..
[8] https://ec.europa.eu/digital-agenda/en/pillar-6-enhancing-digital-literacy-skills-and-inclusion.
[9] http://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/dae/document.cfm?doc_id=5406
[10] https://www.jisc.ac.uk/guides/developing-digital-literacies

3. Digital Literacy challenges and opportunity

ELINET has identified three challenges and three opportunities that policy makers should take into account when developing Digital Literacy initiatives.

Challenges

- **Inequitable access to technology**: this is a key policy issue, especially around free public access in EU Member States, and is compounded by low levels of digital literacy and low skills in literacy more generally. Even if schools and/or public libraries have invested in digital media, many users do not have the knowledge, skills or access to training to use them effectively.

- **Lack of teacher training**: many teachers lack competence, confidence and knowledge of effective strategies to harness the potential of diverse technologies to enhance digital literacy teaching and learning, and to foster young people's resilience to the risks associated with digital technology.

- **Risks for physical and mental health** that may derive from the use of the internet: evidence suggests that there is a growing number of children and adolescents who have had negative experiences whilst using the world wide web[11]. Online risks include unintentionally allowing access to personal data, privacy issues, online reputation management, internet addiction, exposure to inappropriate or sexually explicit material, cyberbullying, reduction of attention span[12] and consequent decline in academic performance. It is therefore very important that parents, caregivers, practitioners and communities are able to offer children and young people guidance on best practices and foster their critical understanding of, and resilience to, the risks they may encounter in online environments[13] [14].

Opportunities

- **Digital devices are a way of life for many**: the social norm of using portable media such as smartphones is a global phenomenon. Portable digital devices offer a highly motivating and accessible medium for literate activity, including for example writing to friends and relations; reading for information and for pleasure; and parents sharing in the enjoyment of stories and games on their mobile devices with their young children.

- **Partnerships with technology companies and software developers** are essential to ensure that high quality products are designed and developed to support the digital literacy development of young learners across Europe, with research informed guidelines and advice to parents, carers and teachers on the benefits and risks of technology. This could contribute to low-cost solutions to improving traditional, as well as digital, literacy levels.

- **Digital Literacy capacity building** would be a cost effective and equitable way **to support the integration of minority communities** such as migrants: online literacy support packages available in all formats, including mobile devices, and in multiple languages can be one solution to a key policy challenge. Online resources would build on current digital skills and competences, support literacy acquisition in the new country, as well as directing migrants and others to wider community resources such as classes and local libraries.

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[11] Holloway D. et al., *Zero to Eight: Young Children and Their Internet Use*, EU kids Online, 2013.
[12] Sparrow B., Liu J., Wegner D.M*, Google effects on memory: Cognitive consequences of having information at our fingertips*, Science, *333*, 776-778; 2011.
[13] Livingstone, S., Mascheroni, G. and Staksrud, E. (2015) Developing a framework for researching children's online risks and opportunities in Europe: EU Kids Online. Available at:
http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/64470/1/__lse.ac.uk_storage_LIBRARY_Secondary_libfile_shared_repository_Content_EU%20Kids%20Online_EU%20Kids%20Online_Developing%20framework%20for%20researching_2015.pdf
[14] Brown A., *Media Use by Children Younger than 2 Years*. American Academy of Pediatrics publications, 2011.