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Let's chat about Digital Literacy!

Digital Literacy hot topics discussed in our ELINET expert's chat

by Gina C. Lemos (VUB, ELINET), and Rosie Flewitt (COST action, DigiLitEY)

Emergent technologies in early childhood: Feeling or filling the gap?

Digital technology is a feature of everyday life in the 21st century, with emergent technology devices constantly re-configuring possibilities for communication and for knowledge flows. The changes in everyday literacy practices brought about by the miniaturisation, mobility and ubiquitous use of digital technologies are as profound as the changes brought about by the invention of the printing press (Kress, 2003). They have inescapable implications for young children, not only for their early literacy development, but also in terms of how education can help to equip today's young citizens for a digitally connected future (Säljö, 2010). Yet the effects of emergent technologies for young children is a hotly debated topic, and there is a "climate of anxiety that surrounds new technology and [creates] a fiercely polarised debate in which panic and fear often drown out evidence" (Byron, 2008., p.1). Rather than being viewed as victims of new technologies, young children should be seen as emerging specialists in design and communication, who use a range of modes (such as words, images and sound) with a variety of literacy tools, both traditional and digital, from their first months of life.

Reading on screen: A building block of development to struggling readers or just another "toy"?

The question is perhaps more profound than just reading on screen. We need to develop our understanding of (and pedagogy for) reading based on broader conceptions of what 'reading' and 'being a reader' mean in the 21st century. Digital technologies play an important role in reading comprehension and in skills building, as do drama, film and a rich array of literacy experiences and resources (Bearne and Bazalgette, 2010) – including phonics as just one aspect of learning to read. The current and growing international tendency for high stakes testing has distorted the teaching of reading, and any narrowing of the reading curriculum needs to be offset by rich and diverse literacy learning and teaching.

Writing on screen: A safeguard to specific learning disorders or just another "pencil"?

Given the diversity of new and traditional media that mediate contemporary literacy practices today's children need to learn to write both on paper and on screen, creating diverse texts that include multiple modes. For learners experiencing moderate to complex disability, digital media such as iPads can enable independence and high levels of achievement, and create new opportunities for writing. For example, the sensation of touch when using digital touch-screen devices can engage their enjoyment of writing by offering a multi-sensory experience that goes beyond the affordances of a pencil (Flewitt et al., 2014).

Generation divide: Are parents and caregivers keeping up or do kids just drive by?

With new media cutting across home-school boundaries, there needs to be a shift in attitude about the importance of home literacy and digital practices. We need to move away from deficit models of homes and families and acknowledge the crucial role played by the home in the development of language, literacy and creativity (e.g. Cremin et al, 2014; Marsh, 2010; Wolfe and Flewitt, 2010). Nor does the sphere of influence for young children lie entirely with parents or main caregivers, but includes other family members such as peers and grandparents (Cremin et al., 2014, 2015; Gregory, 2004; Marsh et al., 2015). We also need to recognise and build on community resources that are available for support, and to build stronger links between homes, schools and community groups and leaders, particularly in areas of poverty.

Early years' learning settings: Are we crossing the line or going online?

The array of digital, interactive, converged and personalised devices that children and young people now encounter in their everyday lives give them access to all forms of knowledge, and are transforming the skills and literacies needed by even the youngest children to be competent actors in the social world. Yet the speed of change in technology and its uses are challenging the efforts of policymakers and educators to imagine new, more “connected” ways to support their learning (Somekh et al, 2007; Westbrook, 2011). We need to develop curricula that foster lifelong skills, and to transform pedagogy to embrace the new opportunities presented by emergent technologies (e.g. mobile, sensor, social media) in order to provide all learners with equitable access to the digital skills and abilities they need to manage and solve complex problems, and that reflect the new kinds of connected learning that today’s students are undertaking outside of school (Knobel, 2005).

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