

# Young children and digital literacy

ELINET Amsterdam January 2016

Dr Rosie Flewitt  
UCL Institute of Education, London  
[r.flewitt@ioe.ac.uk](mailto:r.flewitt@ioe.ac.uk)

# Emergent literacy

Literacy cannot be divorced from language more broadly or from the social contexts of its use

Literacy is given meaning by the cultural discourses and practices in which it is embedded

Young children are from birth witnesses to and participants in a wide range of increasingly digital practices

Handheld portable technologies (e.g. smartphones & tablets), have led to device use becoming ever more intimate and personalised



# Digital media and young lives



**DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES ARE  
MULTIPLE, MOBILE AND  
UBIQUITOUS**

- ❑ Medical records; pre-natal scans
- ❑ Popular culture on TV, games and merchandising
- ❑ Mobile phones (as pacifiers; texting; talking; getting information, games)
- ❑ In-car technologies
- ❑ Digital components in toys
- ❑ Computers & gaming devices
- ❑ Mobile, touch-sensitive devices (iPad, iPhone etc)
- ❑ Distributed, online activities (Club Penguin, Facebook etc)
- ❑ Kindles etc

# Contemporary Literacy Practices

- At least three in four children live in a household with a tablet computer (aged 3-4 =75%); 5-15 = 81%) (Ofcom, 2015)
- 39% of 3-4 year-olds go online either at home or elsewhere (Ofcom, 2015)
- Over half (53%) of 3-4s use a tablet (vs. 39% in 2014) and 75% of 5-15s (vs. 64% in 2014) (Ofcom, 2015:6)
- Young children are playing more games on a tablet (from 21% in 2014 to 28% for 3-4s; from 30% to 37% for 5-7s). Overall, more than half of all 8-11s (52%) and six in ten (60%) 12-15s play games online (Ofcom, 2015:6)
- Dramatic rise in digital book reading among parents and young children, who increasingly are reading stories using personal portable technologies, e.g. iPads/ tablets. Some increase in usage in early education (Formby, 2014)
- Digital use is a global phenomenon e.g. in Pakistan 107.8 million mobile phone users (total population 176.2m); around three-quarters of the world's inhabitants now have access to a mobile phone (WorldBank)

# So what does this mean (1)?

- ❑ Contemporary literacy practices are increasingly characterised by the everyday use of digital media, alongside more conventional media
- ❑ Learning to be literate is a process of making sense of many different signs and symbols which gain meaning from their social and cultural contexts
- ❑ Learning to read 'is one of the most complex achievements of the human brain' (Wyse and Goswami, 2008:706) – and it's getting more complicated!
- ❑ While some textual practices with digital media replicate those associated with print texts, others are associated with 'new literacies', patterned by distributed relationships, multiple identities, multimodality, and online participation (Lankshear and Knobel, 2006)

## So what does this mean (2)?

- ❑ Becoming and being literate is a child's right - it is empowering and can promote a positive sense of self as a learner
- ❑ Home access to digital media is inequitable
- ❑ Many teachers lack either the resources, competence, confidence or knowledge to:
  - ❑ harness the potential of digital technologies in the classroom
  - ❑ foster young people's resilience to the risks associated with digital technology
  - ❑ promote critical and creative digital literacy skills and knowledge
- ❑ Children learn best when they are interested in what they are learning, when literacy activities have a recognisable purpose with which they identify, and where there is a degree of choice and collaboration

# Digital Literacies: a toxic childhood?

Some key concerns:

1. **Physical inactivity** will have adverse effects on children's health
2. **Brain development will be damaged** (temporarily or permanently) by digital exposure, and will result in **anti-social behaviour**, e.g.:
  - *American Academy of Paediatrics*: recommends low exposure to TV and computer screens for children under two
  - *Open Eye Conference* June 2010: adverse effects of screen-based technology in the early years; screens can induce ADHD vs. a child needs real experiences to create new neural circuitry in the brain that becomes intelligence and empathy; "committed protectors of the child's right to a childhood of imaginative play uninvaded by politicians' prescriptive curricula and harmful screens."
3. **Online risks** to children if use the internet

# Digital Literacies: challenges for childhood?

- ❑ The content children are consuming is increasingly curated by digital intermediaries, e.g. providers like YouTube and Google (attractive content which rivals traditional broadcasters, and also seen by many children as ensuring access through their sites to trustworthy content)
- ❑ Smaller screens make parental supervision more difficult and the proliferation of devices increases the need for parents to keep up to date with technology (e.g. in UK, nine in ten parents of 5-15s mediate their child's use of the internet in some way BUT less than one in five parents whose child uses a smartphone or tablet use tools that restrict app installation (Ofcom, 2015)).
- ❑ The wide range of sources of content, increased exposure to advertising, use of social networking and relatively low levels of critical understanding all present challenges for how children:
  - ❑ keep their personal information safe
  - ❑ understand the implications of sharing personal information and content
  - ❑ navigate the increasingly complex online environment in ways that allow them to reap the benefits and minimise the risks.

# Are our education systems able to adapt and incorporate the power of technology-driven learning for young children?

- ❑ Historically, education systems have been based on individualised notions of learning, and a ‘one best system’ which make them less tolerant of fundamental changes to core practices.
- ❑ New information technologies (which require skills in managing resources and where cognition is distributed) pose direct challenges to how schooling operationalizes learning. These challenges illustrate the deep incompatibilities between schooling and the new technologies.

# Features of Good Practice (1)

- ❑ Provide equitable access for all to learn about and with new media
- ❑ Develop and implement effective pedagogy to stimulate students' motivation and interest in learning through diverse digital platforms
- ❑ Develop linguistic, literate (reading and writing across digital and conventional media), social and civic competences and potentialities
- ❑ Enhance the development of multi-literacy communicative repertoires to enable children's successful participation in society
- ❑ Consolidate personal autonomy, identity and initiative with digital media by encouraging children to contribute their out-of-school and multi-literate digital skills and knowledge to classroom learning

## Features of Good Practice (2)

- ❑ Foster creative and critical competences with digital media, including promoting schools as places where teachers and students share creative thinking and knowledge, innovation, responsibility and enterprising initiatives
- ❑ Promote enquiry-led learning and project-based work, including working in multiple media, such as radio podcasts, live broadcasts (e.g. school radio), the creation and broadcasting of audio and/or audio-visual content via the Internet, digital publishing, blogs and web content
- ❑ Promote wider community access to digital media, such as more active engagement of public libraries in digital education

# For discussion

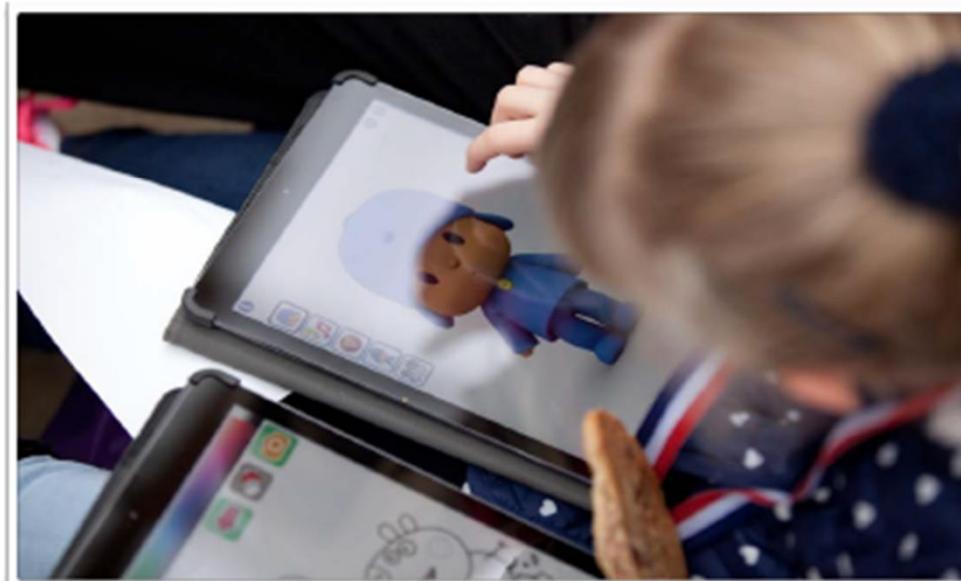
- ❑ What role can digital technologies play in helping children to develop a sense of self as communicators and literate members of today's society?
- ❑ How can we as educators embrace the communicative complexity of contemporary literacy practices?
- ❑ How can we use digital and print media to create purposeful literacy activities that motivate children's engagement and reflect children's interests?
- ❑ How can educators support literacy learning with diverse media in a broad and balanced kaleidoscope of activities that reach beyond school?

---

# Establishing a Research Agenda for the Digital Literacy Practices of Young Children

---

A White Paper for COST Action IS1410



Julian Sefton-Green, Jackie Marsh, Ola Erstad and Rosie Flewitt

<http://digilitey.eu>

<http://digilitey.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/DigiLitEYWP.pdf>

## REFERENCES

- Dyson, A.H. (2001). 'Where are the childhoods in childhood literacy? An exploration in outer (school) space'. In *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*. 1 (1): 9-39.
- Flewitt, R. S. (2012). 'Multimodal perspectives on early childhood literacies'. In J. Larson and J. Marsh (eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Early Childhood Literacy (2nd ed.)*. London: SAGE.
- Flewitt, R.S. (2013). Early Literacy: a broader vision. TACTYC Occasional Paper 3. <http://tactyc.org.uk/occasional-paper/occasional-paper3.pdf>.
- Flewitt, R.S. (2014). 'Early literacy learning in the contemporary age'. In Moyles, J., Payler, J. and Georgeson, J. (eds) *Early Years Foundations: Critical Issues*. Maidenhead: Open University Press: 98-108.
- Jewitt, C. (2008). *Technology, Literacy, Learning: A Multimodality Approach*. London: Routledge.
- Kress, G.R. (1997). *Before Writing: Rethinking the Paths to Literacy* London: Routledge.
- Lankshear C and Knobel M (2006). *New Literacies: Everyday Practice and Classroom Learning*, 2nd edn. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Rideout, V.J., Vandewater, E.A. and Wartella, E.A. (2003). *Zero to Six: Electronic Media in the Lives of Infants, Toddlers and Preschoolers*. Washington: Kaiser.
- 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*.