Toward a Working Definition of Digital Literacy

Margaret-Mary Sulentic Dowell
Louisiana State University, USA

INTRODUCTION

Digital literacy (Alkali & Amichai-Hamburger, 2004; Bawden, 2008; Buckingham, 2006; Gilster, 1997) is a broad, umbrella term that pertains to the use of literacy skills defined as reading, writing, listening, speaking, composing, communicating, and interacting within digital environments. For example, accessing information and sending information via the internet such as viewing and posting YouTube videos or creating, sending, and receiving e-mails is digital literacy. As well, anime, manga, blogging, fandom blogging, texting, tweeting, designing memes, sharing headcannons, and other forms of creating ideas and communicating perspectives through social media platforms such as Facebook, twitter, Tumblr, and myriad others ways to share thoughts and opinions over the internet or in cyberspace, all qualify as digital literacy (Beach, 2012; Black, 2005; Booth, 2012; Martin & Madigan, 2006; Kist, Tollafield, & Dagistan, 2014; Rodesiler, 2015).

Also referred to as *new literacies* (Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear, & Leu, 2007; 2008; Hagood (2009), Knobel & Lankshear, 2014; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; Street, 1998), digital literacy implies both the technical ability and emotional skill level needed to generate thought and communicate in multiple formats within digital environments (Elshet-Alkalai, 2004; Landham, 1995). In particular, both the consumption and generation of text and the practices used to create and consume them, formally and informally, both outside and within school, broadly define new literacies. According to Hagood,

New literacies consist of several characteristics: (1) multimodalities, which include linguistic as well as visual, gestural, and auditory texts, (2) situated social practices, which are culturally, linguistically, and textually based, and (3) identities, which connect text users to text uses. (2009, p. 1)

BACKGROUND: A WORKING DEFINITION OF DIGITAL LITERACY

Digital literacy is a complex combination of skill sets defined as the knowledge, technical skills, use, actions, and behaviors that individuals utilize with existing myriad digital and technological devices and resultant forms of communication that have become an integral part of so many people's daily lives. For instance, every day use of a cellphone, smartphone or perhaps a tablet involve digital literacy skill sets. Thus, digital literacy implies the mastery of both the tools and embedded use of technology in personal lives. Digital literacy is also the recognition that digital forms of literacy and the aforementioned skill sets play an essential, critical role in educational and work settings, particularly the reasoned awareness regarding the content that is created and its use in digital literacy formats. Lanham (1995) argues that the notion of being literate has extended from the ability to read and write, speak and listen, to the ability to understand information that is available and accessible in multimodal ways. Being literate in the 21st century requires being skilled at interpreting complex images and discerning the "syntactical subtleties of words" (Lanham, 1995,

p. 161). Whereas historically literacy has included the notion of both composing and comprehending language, defined as the ability to speak, listen, read, and write, literacy has evolved to include a "social practices" approach from scholars within the emerging educational field of New Literacies (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanic, 2000; Gee, 2001; Street, 1993).

Similar to Lanham, Alkali and Amichai-Hamburger (2004) provide an inclusive, comprehensive definition of digital literacy specifically referring to much more than the ability and skill needed to simply use and navigate a digital device or software, rather, digital literacy requires complex thinking skills as well as critical decision-making ability. The kind of multifaceted thinking required of digital literacy equates to the knowledge beyond how to operate digital devices, access information, or utilize software and refers to the complicated cognitive abilities, requisite motor skills, as well as the sociological and emotional maturity needed to navigate digital environments effectively, usefully, and appropriately. A conceptual model detailed by the authors proposes that digital literacy encompasses five essential digital skills: photo-visual skill – gaining understanding from graphic displays of information; reproduction skill – wherein individuals employ digital reproduction expertise to recreate or craft innovative, significant materials from pre-existing materials; branching skills – defined as building and fashioning knowledge from non-linear, hypertextual navigation); information skills – both assessing and gauging the quality and legitimacy of information), and socio-emotional skills – the mindfulness of the tacit rules that exist and are in place in cyberspace and being able to apply this awareness in online cyberspace communications (Alkali & Amichai-Hamburger, 2004).

Expansion of Digital Literacy

Digital literacy has significant implications for society as a whole and for learning and teaching specifically as new forms of communicating become the norm (Davies & Merchant, 2009; Gilsten, 1997; Hunter & Caraway, 2014; Pool, 1997). As a practical illustration of what was once a new form of communication becoming the norm, twenty years ago, most households in the United States (US) had landlines. Currently, many US homeowners have discontinued a landline and exclusively use a cell phone. In fact, the various platforms and constructs of social media for the current generation of students equates to most students using at least one form of social media as part of their daily lives (Jenkins, 2006; Lapp, Fisher, Frey, & Gonzalez, 2014; New Media Consortium, 2007). These students will matriculate to a career and the work force, taking with them the expectations of using digital literacies.

As an example of the burgeoning use of digital literacy, Rideout, Foehr and Roberts, assert that, "Eight to eighteen-year-olds spend more time with media than in any other activity besides (maybe) sleeping—an average of more than 7½ hours a day, seven days a week." (2010, p. 1). Rideout, Foehr and Roberts surveyed a nationally representative sample of 2,002 3rd–12th grade students, ages 8–18 in the US, which contained a subsample of 702 respondents who voluntarily completed week-long (seven-day) media use diaries. Conducted from October 20, 2008, through May 7, 2009, they report that 8 to 18 year olds were spending approximately 6.5 hours with media (cell phones, internet, television, gaming, music) but because these students were adept at multitasking, they were engaged in closer to 8.5 hours of media content daily. According to the authors, based on a survey sample from 2005 to 2010, young people between the ages of 8–18 increased their media consumption by an hour and 17 minutes to 7.5 hours daily, the average work day for most adults. Considering that adults tend to work 40 hour weeks within a five day span, the consumption detailed in Rideout, Foehr & Roberts' work, represents an incredible amount of time spent with digital literacy. Clearly, the research of Black, (2008), Jenkins (2006), Lapp, Fisher, Frey, and Gonzalez (2014), the New Media

8 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage:
www.igi-global.com/chapter/toward-a-working-definition-of-digital-literacy/183944

Related Content

Business Innovation and Service Oriented Architecture: An Empirical Investigation
Bendik Bygstad, Tor-Morten Grønli, Helge Berghand Gheorghita Ghinea (2011). *International Journal of Information Technologies and Systems Approach (pp. 67-78).*
www.irma-international.org/article/business-innovation-service-oriented-architecture/51369

An Efficient Self-Refinement and Reconstruction Network for Image Denoising
Jinqiang Xueand Qin Wu (2023). *International Journal of Information Technologies and Systems Approach (pp. 1-17).*
www.irma-international.org/article/an-efficient-self-refinement-and-reconstruction-network-for-image-denoising/321456

Supply Chain Resources and Economic Security Based on Artificial Intelligence and Blockchain Multi-Channel Technology
Dong Wangand Ao Yu (2023). *International Journal of Information Technologies and Systems Approach (pp. 1-15).*
www.irma-international.org/article/supply-chain-resources-and-economic-security-based-on-artificial-intelligence-and-blockchain-multi-channel-technology/322385

Assistive Navigation Systems for the Visually Impaired
Kai Li Lim, Lee Seng Yeong, Kah Phooi Sengand Li-Minn Ang (2015). *Encyclopedia of Information Science and Technology, Third Edition (pp. 315-327).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/assistive-navigation-systems-for-the-visually-impaired/112340

Information Systems on Hesitant Fuzzy Sets
Deepak D.and Sunil Jacob John (2016). *International Journal of Rough Sets and Data Analysis (pp. 71-97).*
www.irma-international.org/article/information-systems-on-hesitant-fuzzy-sets/144707