

Chapter 3

Digital Literacy

Reading in the Age of ICT

INTRODUCTION¹

Digital literacy is an important aspect of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) and in this chapter I focus on particular elements of it, including new ways of reading and processing written language, with implications of how literacy is embedded in language. Reading in the 21st Century is no longer confined to reading print books. Electronic versions of many print materials have been made available on the World Wide Web. Some of the advantages of using electronic or digital materials include their relative accessibility and flexibility in terms of time and space. Electronic materials also allow the inclusion of multi-media elements like sound and video clips, which cannot be presented in print books. These and other factors have contributed to growing acquisition rates of e-books and e-journals in academic libraries around

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the world. As urban areas all over the world become more and more crowded, the save-space feature of digital libraries is an even more attractive reason why users of library facilities in academic and public libraries are being encouraged to read electronic versions of publications.

While libraries are encouraging the use of digital resources, a salient issue that one has to take into consideration is the actual acceptability of these materials to users. Are digital materials preferable to print materials, or are print books used more often? Will digital resources replace print ones in the future? Will people still continue to read books in the 21st century? In this chapter I will begin to explore user preferences for print and digital resources in academic libraries from these perspectives. I will do this through a case study of students at the University of Hong Kong, but with occasional comparisons with, and references to, other studies and surveys in other parts of the world, such as in the US (University of Texas at Austin and California State University library surveys) and in Malaysia (Ismail and Zainab, 2005). I would like to show that, however laudable the advantages of electronic books may be over physical print books, user preferences in every situation must be carefully analyzed before a paradigm shift from print to digital library resources can be successfully effected.

The chapter is organized as follows. The first part discusses the nature of digital libraries in relation to the concept of digital literacy, which then leads to the study of user preferences presented in the following section. I next describe the major findings drawn from a survey of a group of undergraduate students and in-depth interviews with eight students and two librarians. Following from this, I highlight the various problems we have observed from the survey results with regard to digital library acceptability. Possible solutions and measures are also proposed. In the concluding part, I summarize the key issues of the chapter.

DIGITAL LITERACY AND DIGITAL LIBRARIES²

In this age of information technology, the traditional notion of ‘literacy’, which is understood as ‘the ability to read and write’ is far from sufficient. In order to adequately characterize literacy in the 21st century, the definition has to capture the relationship between literacy and new technologies. One of such relationships is the ability to process electronic information. In this section, I discuss the concept of digital literacy and its related concepts in the literature. The relationship between digital literacy and our present study of digital library or digital libraries is also discussed.

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