

Digital Literacies

Embracing the Squishiness of Digital Literacy

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The thing about digital literacy is its inherent squishiness. Educators argue whether the tool or the purpose matters most. They debate whether something being “electronic” constitutes “digital.” Does it need a screen? A keyboard? More than that, teachers must decide what it means to read and write digitally and how to assess those skills. Just as teachers were working to conclusively define *literacy*, *digital literacy* arrived on the scene and the discussion started again. In fact, the most solid of ground to be found in the debate surrounding digital literacy is the agreement that, whatever it is, it is important to the success of our students. Even then, not everyone is in agreement.

Accepting, temporarily, digital literacy’s importance, educators are faced with important questions: What is it? How do I teach it? How do I know if my students have learned it? Finding answers to these questions poses challenges—challenges, it turns out, worth facing.

What Is Digital Literacy?

Digital literacy is not a new literacy. This is to say, if digital literacy is simply reading and writing in a digital environment, there is no need for the new terminology. Writing with a pencil and writing with a pen are both writing. Within the domain of reading, a person who can delve into a short story but who struggles through a sonnet is not defined as semi-illiterate. Let us then accept digital literacy as a genre, a format and tool to be found within the domain of standard literacy, rather than a concept standing at odds.

Still, this identification of digital literacy’s place within the realm of traditional literacy helps only to tell us the *where* of digital literacy, not the *what*. The squishiness remains. Let us examine the *what* through the lens of practical experience. Teaching at Science Leadership Academy (SLA), a partnership school between the School District of Philadelphia and The Franklin Institute, has provided ample and varied examples of what digital literacy can be for K–12 students and educators. Perhaps the words *can be* are most important to understanding digital literacy—its fluidity defines it. As an inquiry-driven, project-based public magnet school, SLA asks its students three essential questions: What can we create? What can we learn? What does it mean to lead? Each student receives a laptop computer during the school year to help answer those questions and to aid in students’ inquiry.

In an English class, for example, 11th-grade students interview 9th-grade students about moments that shaped their lives. The interviews are audio

recorded and edited using audio production software on students' laptops. The finished interviews are posted to the school's website on each student's individual blog. Students then listen to and comment on their peers' work along with the global audience, responding to what has been created (see, for example, the "Real World, Real Life" interview here: drupaled.scienceleadership.org/audio/lduffytumasz/22-sep-2008/2771).

The hallmarks of literacy—reading and writing—run through this interview project. In recording the interviews with their peers, the students "write" their rough drafts. Moving from the rough cut of the interview through its various iterations, students learn and practice the revision process. Posting these interviews teaches publishing skills, and commenting demonstrates reader response. Global response exemplifies the importance of keeping audience in mind.

The learning, reading, and writing need not end there. When a student chooses to move beyond the audio interview and uses the camera on his laptop to record a video, the same process is followed, but the product is posted to SchoolTube.com, TeacherTube.com, YouTube.com, or any of the myriad video-based social networking sites. Others—teachers, students, parents—see the project and post comments (see, for example, the "There's a Pill for That: A Nation of Pill-Poppers" video here: www.schooltube.com/video/31acc2c8a0044660b2b9/Theres-A-Pill-For-That-A-Nation-Of-PillPoppers). What could have been a closed, in-class assignment finds its potential in authenticity and audience accessibility while allowing students to create across multiple modalities.

Perhaps that authenticity and accessibility are the pieces we marvel at or leave teachers feeling less than prepared when they think about digital literacy. Perhaps this is the *what*. If multimodality, authenticity, and larger audience are the keys to creation using digital literacy practices, the application of this literacy in consuming the digital productions takes on similar qualities. To read digitally, students and teachers must learn to read beyond the printed page. They must learn to read across all those platforms which they can use to create.

In a U.S. history course, we look beyond the textbook. Students researching bureaucratic processes

within municipal governments build general understanding by producing informational graphics with a host of online graphic creation tools, searching government websites for relevant information, reading citizen testimonials on community pages, navigating the automated phone options of city offices, and interpreting city council meeting minutes posted online. This is reading, across multiple forums, media, linguistic registers, and purposes.

Similar to the podcast interview example, each of these readings could become much more. Reading the city council meeting minutes could evolve into comparing the posted minutes to the video archive of the meeting. Searching government websites for general information could become in-site searches for refined search terms. The students deal with multiple, authentic texts, navigating them by using numerous tools and code switching to understand the writing of multiple authors on a single subject. This is the *what* of reading using digital literacy.

How Do I Teach Digital Literacy?

If these earlier examples serve to explain what digital literacy can be—authentic, multimodal, far reaching, multitool, code interdependent—the question of how to teach such literacy may seem more daunting.

The following is a step-by-step activity that focuses on an element of literacy that applies in a unique way to a digital environment. This activity, called "Who Is Telling the Truth?" addresses issues of bias, sourcing, and interpretation that is evidenced in the age of Internet journalism.

Who is telling the truth? Various news outlets report the same stories every day. Having instantaneous access to news stories from around the country and the world as they occur allows students to evaluate that news for regional interpretation, bias, and sourcing (see, for example, front pages of newspapers worldwide here: www.newseum.org/todaysfrontpages/default.asp). In this activity, students use various modes of digital literacy to accomplish that goal:

1. Identify a widely reported current event.
2. Have students get into groups of three.
3. Task the students with finding stories on that current event, one from a regional publication,

one from a different region in the United States, and one from outside the United States. Students should bookmark the identified links on site such as delicious.com, with a common tag for future sharing and reference.

4. Have each student read one article, independent of the other students, making note of the facts, sourcing, and tone.
5. Have students compare their notes in an attempt to find the “truth” of the current event based on the information in the three articles.
6. Have each group report to the class about the areas of commonality and areas of discord among the three articles. Groups should produce potential explanations for the discord.
7. Have students conduct research to identify the path the journalist followed to find their referenced sources in their article for homework. The goal is to read, watch, or listen to the source in its entirety to determine how it was used within the article.

This activity, up until step 7, can be carried out in a classroom without computers and Web access. The students’ role is very different when using this activity within a tech-embedded environment. Without technology, the teacher provides the sources, and the onus of discovery and inquiry is left to the teacher, not the students. The initial identification of a topic and retrieval of the articles in our example allow the students to locate news articles and make judgments regarding appropriateness and relevance. The homework extends the inquiry, challenging the students to seek out original content that informed the reporter’s writing. With access to technology, learning is

in the hands of the students. The teacher, then, fills the role of knowledge node rather than fountain of knowledge.

SLA’s core values—inquiry, research, collaboration, presentation, and reflection—are not digital values. They are based on timeless goals for education and citizenship. The trick is to seize the monumental potential for independent and interdependent student development supported by these values. The digital aspect of the literacy offers a variety of learning opportunities, formats for creation, and spaces for expression that were not previously available (see, for example, the Digital Citizenship project here: dlaufenberg.pbworks.com/Election+Day+2008+Project).

We then work to help our students embody those values differently than in years past, not because of the technology but because of the manner in which the student leverages the machine to inquire, investigate, explore, and create independently. Having access to technology is not *the* key. An inquiry-driven curriculum *served* by technology is critical. The difference may seem subtle but is dramatically different from the perspective of the student. This version of education yields students that are skilled in consumption, evaluation, and creation of content. As we prepare them for a future in which our understanding of what their needs will become is squishy at best, these skills are key.

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