

**Children as critical consumers and producers of  
multimodal texts**

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This document is the Accepted Version [AM]

**Citation:**

BORLAND, Susan and DANIELS, Karen (2025). Children as critical consumers and producers of multimodal texts. In: DANIELS, Karen and HELKS, Marie, (eds.) An introduction to Diverse Literacies in Primary Classrooms: Perspectives on pedagogy and practice. London, Routledge, 107-123. [Book Section]

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## **Chapter 8. Children as critical consumers and producers of multimodal texts**

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### **Abstract**

This chapter discusses the ways in which children's access to digital technologies has increased the need to teach critical digital literacy skills as it simultaneously offers the opportunities to consume and design multimodal digital texts. Summarising key issues and changes to the literacy landscape, including the lack of clarity around the teaching of digital literacy and the rapid growth of artificial intelligence (AI), the chapter reflects on and examines practical pedagogical strategies for supporting children's critical engagement with the digital and non-digital texts they encounter, consume and produce.

### **Introduction**

The chapters in this book carefully frame children's activity in ways that see them as active participants in literacy, who bring a wealth of cultural knowledge shaped by their home and community experiences to the classroom. In this chapter, we consider the implications of this when we think about an effective way to support children in becoming critical consumers and producers of both print-based and digital texts. From an early age, young children are often confident when exploring and producing multimodal and digital texts and these may be very much part of children's cultural life and home and community experience. However, this confidence with digital tools may detract from the need to explicitly teach critical digital literacy that can protect and empower young people online.

### **The Evolution of Literacy**

Literacy, like any social and cultural activity, continually changes across place and over time. We certainly don't 'do' literacy today, in the same way as we did fifty, ten or even five years ago. One of the significant ways in which literacy changes is shaped by the kinds of literacy materials and resources to hand, and in particular, advances in digital technologies have meant seismic shifts in the ways in which we do literacy (See also Merchant, this volume). Likewise, our understanding of literacy has evolved and is now much broader than the traditional understanding of literacy, associated with the ability to read and write the printed word. The word *literacy* itself is applied to a growing number of conceptual competencies (Barton, 1994), such as 'Health literacy', 'Media literacy', and 'Emotional literacy' to name but a few. These metaphorical uses of *literacy* describe desirable competencies, but otherwise have no connection to the more traditional understandings of literacy. In education, the concept of *literacy* is often used interchangeably with *English*, and this is true of the National Curriculum, where the overarching aim of the Primary English National Curriculum is to "promote high standards of language and literacy" (Department for Education [DFE], 2013, p.13). The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) statutory framework (DfE, 2023) identifies Literacy as a specific area of learning but there is no mention in either curriculum of the development of literacy to be interpreted broadly, or through the inclusion of digital texts. Broader societal use and the significance of the kinds of literacies that are produced using digital tools, such as mobile phones, iPads and laptops, are not yet recognised as significant in school contexts. Indeed, the assessment of both Primary English for children aged 5-11 years, and in the EYFS for children aged 0-5 years, the specific area of learning, 'Literacy',

focuses on the traditional literacy forms of written and print-based texts. In some respects, the omission of digital literacy in the Early Years Foundation Stage statutory framework (2023) reflects the tensions that many Early Years educators express. Concerns that digital technologies sit in opposition to print literacy goals and that such technologies detract from basic skills associated with early literacy development, are prevalent (See Daniels et al. 2015).

Comprehension of print literacies is very often more highly valued in classrooms than other forms of 'reading'. This seems particularly at odds in a society where digital communication, drawing from texts where combinations of print, moving and still images and sound, work together in a kind of orchestration to produce meaning. However, when we think of 'text' we often think purely of a book, or some print based publication or other. Kress (2003) argues that we must question our understanding of the nature of literacy considering its digital multimodal evolution. Like Kress, Evans (2004) recognises the multimodality of 'text' and the ways in which this can produce diverse written and oral forms. Casey and Bruce (2011) describe how literacy can enable participation as new technologies facilitate new (plural) literacies. Within this broader, 21st century understanding of literacy and of 'text', the ability to use and produce information digitally is an ever-increasing part of our lives. As socially situated 'literacies', these digital ways of producing text enable communication and meaning making (Lankshear and Knobel, 2008) which are contextual, reciprocal, and ever-changing (New London Group, 1996; Casey & Bruce, 2011). Despite the focus on print literacy competencies in schools, the ways in which digital tools and technologies shape our evolving literacy practices has been an interesting area of exploration in literacy research. (See for example, Monkhouse and Bailey, this volume.) However, *digital literacies* have proved difficult to define.

### **Spotlight on Research**

#### **Digital Literacy in Literature: What is it?**

Within literature, you will find many different models or explanations of what digital literacy is. The systematic, qualitative literature review by Tamborg et al. (2018), with its modest study of 55 papers, offers an interesting analysis of the range of uses of digital literacy as a concept. They identify eight main usages of digital literacy to describe *how* differences in digital literacy as a term exist. They also discuss *why* it is ambiguous and used in different ways, by identifying a lack of definitions within literature, in addition to a wide range of theoretical approaches to defining digital literacy as a concept. Tamborg et al. identify a range of different conceptualisations in literature, in addition to those studies about digital literacy which do not provide a definition of what it is. This includes:

1. Reading and writing with digital technology
2. Communication
3. Access to and acquaintance with digital tools
4. Attitude toward technology
5. Digital skills and knowledge
6. Social practice and classroom culture
7. Ethics
8. Critical thinking
9. No definition/no Uses of the term

(Tamborg et al., 2018, p.7)

Within literature that does not define digital literacy, Tamborg et al. (2018) identify two main features, which they refer to as *tacit replacements* and *tacit definitions*. They use *tacit replacements* to describe where the term digital literacy is used in the title or body of the text

but is then replaced by a similar term. *Tacit definitions* describe the way that digital literacy is referred to in studies, but not defined. The range of theoretical conceptualisations of digital literacy, in addition to the tacit use of the definitions identified in the study by Tamborg et al., exemplifies the complexity associated with understanding what digital literacy is, what it includes, and how it is then framed.

Belshaw (2010), questions the need to create a new digital ‘literacy’ and Casey and Bruce (2011) remind us that although we may seek to name and define the new literacies associated with digital literacy, it is not new to the children we teach: it is simply literacy as they know it today. Within the wider understanding of literacy as socially situated and enabling communication and meaning making (Lankshear and Knobel, 2008), many children’s home literacies are increasingly digital (Ofcom, 2023) and often more so than the traditional print-based literacies they are taught in school. This raises the question of whether there should be more inclusion of these digital literacies to engage children with literacy learning in a way that is not only relevant to their lives and experiences, but necessary in the digital age.

### **Digital Literacy and the evaluating multimodal texts**

The evolving nature of digital tools and their affordances has provided a challenge for academics seeking to classify this new form of literacy. In 1997, Paul Gilster first coined the term ‘digital literacy’ to describe the way that digital texts have revolutionised the way that we interact with information online:

*“Digital literacy is the ability to understand information and more important-to evaluate and integrate information in multiple formats that the computer can deliver” (Gilster, 1997, p.6)*

Gilster’s concept of ‘digital literacy’ is a general explanation of the abilities that are necessary to be able to understand, evaluate and combine the multimodal information that computers present, with a particular emphasis on the need to evaluate its source and context. Gilster’s definition predates Web2 technologies that utilise user-based content and merge users as both consumers and producers of information (Jenkins, 2006), but because his definition is quite general, and he does not try to list all the skills that it encompasses, it has stood the test of time reasonably well.

In this chapter, we take forward Gilster’s definition, of digital literacy, and think further about how we can evaluate the ‘source and context’ of digital and non-digital texts. First, we look more closely at multimodality and its implications for children’s comprehension of digital texts.

### **Multimodality and digital literacies**

Multimodality in a broad sense, is used to describe the use of different modes of communication that produce meaning: for example, using words, still and moving pictures and images, art, or music. It is important to remember however that multimodality is not exclusive to the digital realm, and it has long been considered good practice to interweave children’s traditional literacy learning with diverse, non-digital modalities such as art and drama (Evans, 2004). Examples include the use of visual story maps to aid writing composition, the ‘hot seating’ of characters and the scrutiny of illustrations, to support and develop children’s comprehension. Multimodality also acknowledges the embodied nature of human communication – and how the orchestration of words, bodily movements, gestures, sounds, as well as objects around us, come together to produce meaning.

The multimodal nature of digital texts expands the processes incorporated in their comprehension. Walsh (2008) describes how digital information can be 'read' in different ways, including by being viewed or listened to. The author describes how digital writing too has expanded and can encompass talking, interacting, or producing and designing digital texts. Consequently, Walsh highlights the importance of research into new literacy pedagogy that combines traditional print-based literacy practices with an understanding of how to design and use digital modalities, the aim of which is to enable children to develop the skills needed to evaluate multimodal texts. There is also the opportunity to support and engage children who find traditional literacy practices challenging, by embracing the use of multimodal reading and writing to enable them to communicate in the mode that they find most accessible.

### **Digital Agency and some of its problems**

As facilitators of multimodality, the agency of digital technologies themselves, are the focus of a growing number of studies. From a semiotic technology perspective, Knight et al., (2020) highlight the impact of digital technology on the creation of meaning and discuss the importance of educating children about 'hidden agents' acting within the digital interface and making them more salient to users. For example, Dooly & Darvin (2022) describe the danger of social media algorithms that facilitate the spread of misinformation and manipulate the information we are presented with, based on who we like or dislike, leading to the production of insular communities or *echo chambers*. These echo chambers allow users to share common views free from opposition or challenge and can foster intolerance and social fragmentation by race, gender, ethnicity and social class. They also have the power to negatively impact on the self-esteem of children and young people by measuring the value of users' interactions in terms of likes, comments and shares.

#### ***Spotlight on Research***

##### **Digital Equality**

It is not always the simple case that children's home literacies are more digital than their school literacies. Some parents may choose to minimise their children's screen time or access to digital devices, but for many families this is not a choice. The inequality of access to digital information was underlined during school lockdowns in 2020 and schools became more aware of the children in their communities who did not have the resources to access appropriate digital devices, the internet and even a quiet space to study at home (Ofqual, 2021). In their report on digital exclusion, Holmes & Burgess (2021) identify that digital exclusion is more likely amongst lower income households (Office of National Statistics [ONS], 2019). Although people within these households may have internet-linked devices (i.e. a phone), access to information may be hampered by a lack of digital skills, a suitable device, e.g. a laptop, or a reliable internet connection.

Research from EU Kids (Smahel et al., 2020) finds that children who engage with a wider range of online activities develop better digital literacy skills than those who do not. This highlights the issue of unequal access to digital resources and the associated outcomes – the so-called 'digital divide' or 'participation gap' (Jenkins, 2009; Lythreath et al., 2021). Back in 2008, Lankshear and Knobel discussed the early evidence of an alignment of digital literacy inequity with traditional literacy inequity. More recently, Hu et al. (2018) correlate a link between academic achievement and digital capability, through the exploration of Programme for International Student Assessment's (PISA) data from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 2015.

Schools have an opportunity to address this inequity and enable children to develop their understanding of digital affordances to empower them to interact effectively and responsibly online. This is also particularly the case with children who have special educational needs or disabilities (SEND) or who have had adverse childhood experiences (ACE), as research shows that just as these children are more vulnerable in the real world, they are also particularly vulnerable online (HM Government, 2021).

### **Where are Digital Literacies in the EYFS and Primary Curriculum?**

Merchant (2020) argues in favour of broad agreement on the kinds of practices we value and wish to support in classrooms. However, within the Early Year's Foundation Stage Framework (DfE, 2023) and the Primary National Curriculum (DfE, 2013) digital literacy does not have its own subject curriculum. This is perhaps particularly surprising in the English National Curriculum, as it asserts in its purpose that, "All the skills of language are essential to participating fully as a member of society" (DFE, 2013, p.3). The only formal references to digital literacy in the Primary National Curriculum are vague online safety-related references within the Computing curriculum about recognising acceptable/unacceptable behaviour and knowing how to report concerns about *Content* and *Contact*. In the current 'Keeping Children Safe in Education' (DfE, 2023) guidance, there are *four* areas of risk, including *Commerce* and *Conduct*, demonstrating a greater awareness and understanding of evolving risks and highlighting the need to update the Computing curriculum.

In 2019, additional statutory guidance regarding online safety was introduced in the Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) and Health Education curriculum (DfE, 2019), but there has been no revision to the Primary English curriculum to include digital literacy. This is despite concerns being raised about the ability of children and young people to identify correct information online, with a National Literacy Trust survey (2018) indicating that only 2% of children have the critical literacy skills to be able to identify fake news or misinformation. In response to the findings by the National Literacy Trust (2018), the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee (2019, p.19) recommended that a comprehensive framework for digital literacy be created within Personal, Social, Health Education (PSHE) as a 'fourth pillar of education, alongside reading, writing and maths'. Whilst agreeing that digital literacy is key to tackling disinformation, this was dismissed by the government who asserted that digital literacy was already taught across the curriculum (Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, 2020). The government is currently working to prevent children's exposure to harmful information, particularly on sites designed for their use, through the Online Safety Bill (Department for Digital Media, Culture and Sport, 2022). This will hopefully reduce children's exposure to misinformation, but it does not remove their need to be taught the critical digital literacy skills to effectively evaluate content across *all* digital platforms. However, when the statutory curriculum does not give specific reference to digital literacies, it may be difficult for teachers to include a focus on these within their practice. Furthermore, as found by Borland, below, some teachers seem unsure of the value of digital literacy and how to teach it. This is interesting as teachers are very likely to use digital technologies in their own lives but may not be aware of the significance of these in children's developing repertoires.

### **Spotlight on Research**

Susan's recent research into the way that digital literacy is understood by teachers and the extent to which primary literacy is digital, suggests that digital literacy is not well understood by primary teachers. It also suggests that the lack of curriculum guidance and the expectation that digital literacy is taught across the curriculum (Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, 2020) is in fact hindering teachers in their ability to empower young users

with the skills and knowledge needed to navigate the digital world. This seems particularly significant as many children are already accessing digital resources before they start school. The small-scale, but in-depth case study research, conducted across two primary schools, found that despite a lack of clarity around the identification and understanding of what digital literacy is, amongst the teacher participants, digital literacy is an embedded part of cross-curricular literacy practice in both schools. However, whilst the digital literacy skills of teachers were evident in the study (to a greater or lesser extent), in their use of digital tools to facilitate learning, the extent to which digital literacy skills are developed by the children is unclear. Further research is needed to measure the impact of current practice on the development of children's digital literacy. There is evidence to suggest that digital literacy is used widely to support traditional literacy practices such as reading, phonics and to a lesser extent writing. However, it is unclear whether digital literacy is taught discretely and the extent to which the link between digital literacy and English, within the wider multimodal view of literacy (New London Group, 1996), is understood.

### **A Word about Digital Natives**

Young, confident users of digital technologies can be assumed to be 'digital natives' because they have grown up with new technology, unlike their older 'digital immigrant' teachers and parents (Prensky, 2001). However, Dooly & Darvin (2022) describe the danger of this assumption, which can be a barrier for some teachers, as it risks moving the responsibility for critical reflection onto younger users who are unaware of its ability to marginalise or promote exclusion. Although written before the introduction of the current National Curriculum (DfE, 2013), Hague & Payton (2010) describe how adults and teachers, who may potentially lack confidence or functional digital skills, can still support children to develop the critical analysis skills to allow them to question digital information and assess its reliability. Teachers are also able to support collaboration, effective communication and understanding of social and cultural factors to allow them to effectively evaluate all forms of information, both digital and non-digital. For decades concerns have been raised about children's access to books in the home (See also Sharpe and Taplin, in this volume). Access to suitable digital tools and content has in many ways complexified this concern, as children have unequal access to these. This foregrounds the issue that children's success in literacy can be impacted by not just social and cultural factors, but by economic ones too.

Adults in education settings therefore have an important role in helping children to navigate the print and digital landscape and children's confidence with the technology in itself, should not be mistaken for the complex understandings needed to critically reflect on both print and multimodal texts. The *Spotlight on Research* that follows illustrates some concerns of researchers of digital literacies in early years classrooms, and how even very young children can be influenced in significant and often concerning ways, through their interactions with digital technologies.

#### ***Spotlight on Research***

##### **Wohlwend, K. & Hall, T. (2017) Race and Rag Dolls: Critically Engaging the Embodiment of Diversity in Lalaloopsy Transmedia**

Wohlwend explores how children's engagement with literacy takes place in a commercialised world. In her book chapter, she discusses how children's interests in favourite characters can often be propelled by media franchises who link products across platforms that influence how children live their daily lives, from what they say, what they eat, how they sleep. In addition, very particular representations of race and gender are portrayed through the products and merchandise.

*'As children watch television programs and DVDs, tap through games and apps on tablets and phones, play with dolls and action figures, they can also be clothed in licensed apparel, snack on character gummies, tote school supplies in themed backpacks, and so on. These franchises of branded products grounded by a media narrative, or transmedia, produce far-reaching, ubiquitous, and pervasive flows of merchandise but also circulate discursive messages attached to media narratives' (Wohlwend, 2017, p155)*

## **What Is Critical Literacy and Why Is It Important?**

The sections above clearly indicate that critical digital literacy is an important educational goal for life in a digitally mediated world. Parents, teachers, policy makers and researchers cannot take it for granted that children have equal access to digital literacy, or that their experiences with it as 'digital natives' will equip them with the skills to consume and produce digital texts in ways that are beneficial to their lives, and to their broader communities.

Texts are ideological, that is, they contain the ideas, beliefs, and values of the text producer (See Street, 1995). Texts are never neutral and Wohlwend's work clearly demonstrates how they can shape children's understandings of their world and the people in it, and that children are often the target audience for media franchises. The youngest children can be drawn into the ideas, thoughts, markets and ideological positions of the producers of digital texts. Texts can assert immense power positions, and they are always produced with an intention or purpose; to argue, to share information, to entertain, to discuss, to persuade, for financial gain or customer 'loyalty'. These beliefs, values and intentions are often 'hidden' or implicit. By reflecting on the affordances digital texts, we may be better equipped to support children in developing their own critical literacy skills when 'reading' online texts. First, it is worth identifying some of the key features of digital and print texts.

When we compare a digital text to a print text, we can generally assume the following:

*Print texts* convey meaning through drawing on the alphabetic code, read from left to right (in English) and from the top to the bottom of the page. Print can have different fonts, styles and sizes, but generally it is assumed to be of a form that is conducive to tracking with the eyes, and follows conventions of punctuation, spelling and grammar for the purposes of clarity of expression. Authorship of print and 'published' texts, tends to be acknowledged and have been through a process of commission and review. Published, print based text tend to take time to produce and distribute to readers, although both digital and print versions of texts may be published rapidly available.

*Digital texts* may have some or most of the features above. They may also draw on the affordances of combinations of modes: sound, moving images, print, colour, still images to convey meaning. The digital reading pathway may be guided by hyperlinks to other content and websites, including advertisements. Authorship of digital texts may be acknowledged, but very often it is hard to determine who has produced the text. Often there are opportunities for readers to respond and comment, so becoming 'co-authors'. Digital texts are often instantly published, readily and widely available to readers, and may be quickly editable.

In considering the distinctions above, children require critical literacy skills whether working with both print based and digital texts, and though print and digital texts raise similar issues, they also raise some quite different challenges. In Chapter 7, for example, Helks and Myers discuss the teaching and grammar. Developing children's knowledge about how language works in written texts can empower them to make specific language choices to create impact on meaning, and also support children in identifying specific linguistic devices in texts used to persuade or inform, for example. Digital texts have a different kind of 'grammar' that

involves the impact of multiple modes in orchestration, that creates very particular kinds of effects. It is essential therefore that children are equipped with understandings of how they respond to (or consume) and create (or produce) both print and digital texts.

Maine and Shields (2015) noted how often the use of digital texts such as film have the potential to support and enhance traditional print-based comprehension skills. Their small-scale research study demonstrates the potential for alternatives to written texts, such as film, to enhance children's comprehension skills by focussing on the development of oral language. The study suggests that by focussing on a range of texts, including film, children's print-based comprehension skills can be quantifiably increased.

Critical literacy is a key element of digital literacy, identified in a range of literature (Tamborg et al., 2018), but it is not a new concept, and it can be argued has been fundamental to literacy education over generations. Indeed, it is closely linked to critical thinking, which could be reasonably argued should be an overarching aim of education.

### **Critical Literacy and some of its theorists**

Below, we present several theorists and how they have explained critical literacy.

#### *Louise Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory of reading*

In understanding how we can develop critical literacy, Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory of reading presents a useful description of what happens in the reading process. Rosenblatt (1995) described comprehension as what he termed a transaction between the reader and the text, within a particular cultural context. This is significant, as it implies that the meaning is not purely in the hands of the author but is shaped by the reader and the ways in which they make sense of the text, from their own cultural position and experience. In the light of this, key to Rosenblatt's position is that developing reader response through discussion around texts is essential to literacy education. This positions the reader as an active participant in the reading process and acknowledges that readers both individually and socially construct meanings and impressions from the texts they read. Our own experiences and cultural backgrounds, therefore, influence the kinds of ways in which we understand and interpret the texts we read. Rosenblatt's work originally referred to print-based texts, but the implications of the transactional view of reading have a similar resonance when we reflect on the ways in which we 'read' and make sense of digital texts.

#### *Paulo Freire and the workings of power*

In 1970, in his landmark thesis, Paulo Freire hailed that critical literacy should be a key feature of education and include an examination of how power works in language. Freire's work was driven by an understanding that learners should be co-creators of knowledge, and active participants in the reading process, moving beyond passively accepting the text's message. Freire argued that this involves questioning, examining, and disputing the power relations that exist between readers and authors (and indeed teachers). His work was specifically about considering the ways in which readers should ask the following questions:

- Who produced this information? Why did they produce it?
- Where was it published?
- What does it really say?
- Who is it aimed at?
- What is it based on?
- Is there evidence for it, or is it just opinion?
- Is it verifiable elsewhere?

Recent concerns over the proliferation and consumption of digital texts however have heightened concerns for educators, parents and policy makers. These range from challenging issues such as online safety, children accessing biased, inaccurate, or inappropriate content, to concerns about the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people. It is also clear that children and young people are not always able to sufficiently evaluate the texts that they encounter.

*Margaret Mallett and the questioning of authorship*

Response to texts, stimulated by discussion, and asking critical questions about authorship is key to critical appreciation of texts. Mallett (1992) highlighted that discussing texts and encouraging children to respond to texts was crucial in developing critical literacy. This also included the teaching of inference and encouraging children to provide reasoned justification of their views about texts. Mallett (1992) also describes the importance of discerning fact from opinion (where this is overt – if we are to assume that language and literacy is ideological). Mallett also suggested that children needed to look closely at the structure of language and language choices made by the author, and the ways in which this contributes to the meaning of a text.

*Hillary Janks - texts as potent ways of reading, seeing and acting*

For Janks (2014), being a critical reader is more than just not passively accepting a text message, but it is an issue of social justice, and being able to understand the workings of power and influence in texts. According to Janks, texts have social effects and always present a version of 'truth' that can be used for good and ill and that texts produce identity positions in readers, and impact on who has access to opportunities for a better life. Janks asserts that critical literacy can give us potent ways of reading, seeing, and acting in the world. To achieve this, the teacher's role is to encourage children to become *resistant readers* who do not blindly buy into the meanings and positions that texts offer. This necessitates supporting a child's growing understanding that texts are not neutral, and to recognise the ways in which language can be a powerful way of influencing.

**Prompts for Critical Reflection**

Consider the ways in which Rosenblatt, Mallett, Freire and Janks describe texts and reflect on the following:

Does anything surprise you about the positions held by the authors above?  
Which ones particularly appeal to you and why?

Reflect on your own practice when teaching literacy. Do you encourage children to:

- Give their views about the texts they read and discuss why they hold these views (Mallett)
- Reflect on their differing interpretations and responses to the texts they read (Rosenblatt)
- Be resistant readers? (Janks)
- Ask children how the text is positioning them as a reader? (Janks)
- Discuss with children how the text is positioning people and places in the text? (Janks)
- Talk about the language choices used in texts? (Mallett)
- Ask critical questions about the source, context or author of the texts they read? (Freire)

## **Developing Critical Literacy in digital texts.**

In the section that follows, we summarise some of the thinking about critical literacy that can help guide thinking and practice. This includes ensuring children are not passively accepting the messages in texts and that they develop an understanding of the ways in which texts exert power and influence. While we are arguing that some critical literacy skills can cross both print-based and digital texts, there are also some different challenges, as explored by Lim and Loh (2020) in the *Spotlight on Research* below.

### ***Spotlight on Research***

#### **Lim and Loh and Information Literacy**

Lim and Loh (2020) identify the ability to read digital texts critically and make balanced judgements about the information they provide as a part of Information Literacy (IL). They identify the key skills and awareness needed for digital reading as including the ability to strategically explore information, for example by using navigation buttons and hyperlinks and the understanding that the creation of information is both a process and a product. They also highlight the importance of understanding and being cognisant of how meaning is created by the multimodal element within digital texts. These multimodal elements enable digital reading to be a social experience that can be engaged with both continuously and asynchronously, at a time that suits the reader. Multimodal elements such as hyperlinks also enable a level of agency and interactivity, with readers able to decide what and how they read.

Lim and Loh (2020) suggest learners who do not fully understand the knowledge conveyed by digital multimodal texts are disadvantaged by their inability to critically evaluate what they read and recognise nuances of meaning. They also highlight digital readers' frequent divergence from print reading processes, and the use of shallow processing strategies such as skimming and scanning, that limit their ability to comprehend. Lim and Loh therefore advocate the development of linear print reading strategies to support knowledge building.

#### **Suggestions for practice in early years and primary**

Lim and Loh clearly illustrate how digital texts can create challenges and may require some quite different critical literacy skills than those associated with print-based texts. Below, we present suggestions for practice, written by teachers, which can enhance children's awareness of how both print and digital texts work, and support the development of their critical literacy skills.

The first example is from Susan and illustrates how working with film clips can enhance children's understanding of how the modes of film work to produce meaning and effect.

#### ***Case Study Focus***

##### **Using wordless film to develop comprehension.**

*I used Wallace and Gromit films, as part of an intervention to support the oral language skills of a group of Year 4 children, whose difficulty with word reading was a barrier to comprehending print-based texts. The children watched parts of the film together and then used discussion and hot seating to develop their understanding of characterisation. Although the character of Gromit does not speak in the films, he is physically expressive, and this was used to help the children to explain how they could infer what he was thinking through his actions. "Gromit is scared because his ears are up!" and "I think Gromit is thinking that Wallace is being silly because he is shaking his head and rolling his eyes."*

*This approach as an intervention certainly engaged the children and allowed them to develop their comprehension of characters feelings and intent, separately from developing their word reading.*

The next example, by Siobhan, Key Stage 1 teacher, illustrates the way that KS1 children's comprehension can be scaffolded using small play and develop their reader responses. You will notice how what plays out allows the children to challenge assumptions made in texts and the value of exploring children's evolving ideas through moments when they are engaged in play.

### **Case Study Focus**

#### **Small World play in KS1**

*We use small world play to support our texts especially in KS1. The play allows children to understand the text in a different way as they think about it and imagine themselves in the story. I remember once in a Year One literacy session we were looking at alternative fairy tales. Two boys were building towers and I encouraged them to use the figures to retell Rapunzel. There were not enough figures, so the boys decided to use a female doll to rescue Rapunzel as one child suggested "some women marry women". This led to a class discussion about different kinds of families. The children questioned why fairy tales traditionally have a Mum, Dad and children structure. The conversations about representation that followed were high level for the age group and I don't think such analysis would have come about without the children having time to mull the story over through play.*

Siobhan's example shows how retelling of stories in different ways can often help children think more critically about the assumptions presented within them. Exploring different versions of traditional stories and comparing the differences helps children to understand how authors make choices and shape narratives differently. Some authors deliberately subvert character stereotypes and again this draws attention to the kinds of decisions that authors make when presenting characters, and the kinds of messages that these presentations convey. For example, Robert Munsch's book 'The Paper Bag Princess' presents a princess very different to the ones in traditional tales. 'The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs', by Jon Scieszka and Lane Smith provides an alternative story that challenges the idea of the stereotypical villain of the original Three Little Pigs story by using the device of an unreliable narrator. 'Mr. Wolf and the Pancakes', by Jan Fearnleigh embellishes the character of the wolf; rather than being a hunger driven beast, he is a vulnerable and struggling character, trying to get help from his friends. The shocking and surprising ending to the story is very subtle, and open to multiple interpretations and so is useful for class discussion of what happened and why.

### **Case Study Focus**

#### **Fake News and Year 5**

*To develop Y5 children's ability to discern fake news, I presented the children with a number of short news articles, including some that were true and some fake news stories. We went through each of the articles together and discussed ways that we could evaluate whether they were true, for example by fact checking using reputable news websites. It was interesting to hear the children's discussion of the plausibility of each of the texts. Several children based their evaluations on their own prior knowledge and the some of the fake images persuaded some children that they might be true. It became clear that some children were unclear about what fake news is, and the fake news stories that contained an element*

*of truth were harder to spot. This helped the children to realise that although there may be an element of truth in some fake news stories, it can be sensationalised or exaggerated, so that it becomes false.*

*As a follow-up activity, the children were also given the opportunity to work with programmes that allow images to be manipulated, to develop their understanding of how digital tools can create fake images. This is particularly important because of the proliferation of fake images on social media.*

### **Case Study Focus**

#### **Webpages at Key Stage 2: Multimodal news**

*I remember my Year 4 class enjoyed reading the Newsround webpage and I used it as an opportunity to talk about how we could navigate to different stories and information by clicking on hyperlinks or images that enabled videos to play. We identified the multimodal features on the homepage, and how they enabled different reading pathways and understanding of the information on each web page. We explored different pathways to find out more information and then the children used this analysis of multimodal elements to design a multimodal 'news' bulletin in PowerPoint that included features such as sound buttons and embedded videos. We used our print writing and reading skills to construct the information within the news and the children really engaged with the digital format of this activity. The finished news pages were uploaded to the internet, so that they could be shared with parents, and the children enjoyed having their work published in an authentic way.*

#### **Some further thoughts about strategies to develop critical literacy skills**

The case studies above demonstrate how critical literacy can be embedded into teaching to draw children's attention to the ways in which text work and provide them with tools for evaluating the texts they come across at home and at school. Of course, online safety plays a key part in stakeholders' responsibilities to children and equipping them with an understanding of the workings of power in texts is key to keeping them safe as they grow. In many ways, supporting the development of children's inference and deduction skills will enhance their skills in reading critically. Below are some additional *Ideas for Classroom Practice* to draw on:

#### ***Ideas for Classroom Practice***

- Encourage children to find out about the authors of the text (this is not always possible on online texts)
- Teach children how to use retrieval devices (contents, indexes, online searches, glossaries) to locate information.
- Identify the purpose of the text and whether it is good at achieving this purpose.
- Looking for clarity in organisation and presentation of information
- Present children with a wide range of print and digital texts written for a range of purposes and encourage them to draw on these to create their own texts
- Talk about the multimodal affordances of digital text, and consider how the various modes (e.g. sound, colour, moving images, text) work together to create meaning
- Learn how to navigate (safely) the reading path of digital texts and the use of hyperlinks

## **An eye on the present and into the future - 'Fake News' and AI**

In 2018, the National Literacy Trust commissioned an inquiry into critical literacy and fake news, concerned by the increasing concerns that 'the new digital media landscape can be bewildering and overwhelming even for experienced media consumers' (Picton, 2018, foreword by Lucy Powell MP). The commissioned study involved written evidence submitted by a range of stakeholders, surveys of 388 primary aged children and 1,832 secondary students, and 414 teachers in the UK. The report called for the need to teach critical literacy skills in primary and secondary schools and showed that:

- Almost half of children interviewed were worried about not being able to spot fake news
- Two-thirds of teachers believe fake news is harming children's well-being, increasing their anxiety levels
- Half of teachers believed that the national curriculum does not equip children with the literacy skills they need to identify fake news.

Defining 'Fake News' however, is far from uncontentious, and Picton drew on Rubin (2017) who defined five types of fake news as follows:

1. That which is intentionally deceptive
2. Jokes taken at face value
3. Large-scale hoaxes
4. Slanted reporting of real facts, and
5. Stories where the truth is contentious

The final report (Picton, 2018) provides a comprehensive review of the inquiry and a framework of strategies to work towards ensuring that children and young people are supported in a digital era (See also Merchant, this volume). This endeavour necessitates collaboration by industries, web designers, policy makers, parents, educators and children themselves. The report also includes a range of resources for teachers to develop critical literacy in their classrooms.

<https://literacytrust.org.uk/policy-and-campaigns/all-party-parliamentary-group-literacy/fakenews/>

## **Critical Literacy and Artificial Intelligence (AI)**

The advent of generative AI, and its 'ability' to create original text, images, videos, sound and music has meant that it is even more important to talk to children about how they can evaluate the texts they encounter. The rapid growth of Artificial Intelligence (AI) is impacting on the digital information landscape, with language models such as ChatGPT and Google Bard capable of producing high quality 'original' writing in different styles and purposes. With the look and feel of a chatbot, these language models can respond to prompts and answer questions, providing information formulated from large internet-based datasets, including Wikipedia, which means that they are not always 100% accurate. The quality of the writing (if not always the information) is proving challenging for both human readers and plagiarism tools, such as 'Turnitin' to discern AI generated text from human authored writing. However, it is important to note that AI powered Chatbots lack the ability to reflect, and the writing produced can be impersonal. Therefore, collaboration with AI still requires human criticality to add depth and personalisation. Other forms of AI are being used to produce 'deep fake' pictures, videos and sounds that can mimic human voices, adding to the need for young consumers and producers of digital content to develop their evaluative literacy skills to interact with AI tools appropriately and safely. To address the issue of AI, it is quite simply necessary to educate children what it is, what it can do and explore ethical implications associated with its use. Children from a young age are using these digital tools to learn

about aspects of literacy such as phonics, reading and writing. The implications of AI are still emerging and currently nations, institutions and organisations are working through the implications of AI to both the integrity and safety of communications and production of texts.

Kervin and Mantei (2016) describe how the expanded understanding of *text* requires a reconceptualisation of traditional writing practices and review of the processes by which digital texts are created. It is important that as teachers we enable children to have opportunities to produce their own digital *texts*, to develop their understanding of how digital modes can be used to create meaning and develop their ability to critically evaluate the digital texts that they encounter.

## Chapter summary

Children, often from a very young age, are consumers and producers of digital content both in school and at home (Ofcom, 2023), and there is a strong body of research that generates understandings of the ways in which children's lives and literacy practices are influenced by digital media" (Burnett & Merchant, 2018). Literacy education 'lags behind' and its focus is predominantly on the developing of reading and writing. This is concerning, particularly where the need to have good skills in critical literacy, and critical digital literacy is more pressing than ever. Many of the strategies to support critical literacy of print-based texts are still important when consuming and producing digital texts. However, the need for children to understand how power and influence works in texts, and to effectively manage or 'deal with' the proliferation of multimodal texts in flow in the media landscape, is crucial.

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