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Thriving in the 21st century: the report of the LLiDA project (Learning Literacies for the Digital Age): Introduction

Introduction: learning literacies in the digital age

1. 1 Why 'learning literacies for a digital age'?

The phrase *digital literacies* or *literacies for a digital age* expresses a tension between two points of view:

- education needs to carry on doing much what it has always done (literacy as a generic capacity for thinking, communicating ideas, and intellectual work)
- education needs to change fundamentally (digital technologies and networks as transforming what it means to work, think, communicate and learn)

This digital challenge to the educational status quo comes in the form of several profound social shifts, explored in more detail in the following section. Arguments over the definition and project of 'digital literacy' often revolve around which of these shifts are seen as most radical and defining of the current moment, and what degree of challenge they are perceived as presenting to current systems of education and learner support.

Without doubt today's learners, and their educators, need to respond to changes in:

- the nature of work
- the nature of learning for work, and learning in work
- (arguably) the nature of cognition or knowledge processing
- the nature of useful knowledge in society
- the nature of social life and citizenship
- communications media
- other technologies and technical capabilities
- the experience and expectations of learners themselves, as a consequence of the above

Against this background of change, the practices of colleges and universities, and the capabilities of their graduates, are under critical review. It seems likely that the challenges outlined above can be met by changes in:

- The kinds of capabilities valued, taught (for) and assessed by colleges and universities
- The ways in which learners' capabilities are supported and assessed
- (Arguably) the value colleges and universities place on 'literacies of the digital' and the investment they make in staff and student skills

However, some evidence we review in this study suggests that a more radical challenge to educational institutions and their practices is underway.

In this study we review the evidence of change in the contexts of learning, likely future scenarios, and current responses (Section 2). We analyse frameworks of competence and capability that have been developed to help institutions understand and respond to the literacies agenda (Section 3). We go on to describe our findings from a study of current practice in literacies provision in UK FE and HE (Section 4), including evidence from 15 audited institutions and over 40 examples of forward thinking practice. Finally, in Section 5, we offer some conclusions and recommendations.

1.2 Scope and definitions

For the purpose of this study, our understanding of '*learning literacies'* encompasses the range of practices that underpin effective learning in a digital age.

We are using the phrase '*learning literacies for a digital age'* rather than 'digital literacies' to indicate that we are open to finding major continuities in what makes for effective learning and in how institutions

should provide for it, while at the same time foregrounding a context in which what is required of learners is changing, perhaps fundamentally.

We use the term '(underpinning) *practices'* in the hope of side-stepping some of the debates about definition and philosophy that beset literacies research, and in particular the 'paradigm contest' between cognitive and socially situated accounts of learning. Our focus in the study is on the pragmatic challenges that face learners and the institutions and educators that seek to support their development *in practice* as more capable human beings.

We understand the term '*literacy*' – in contrast to other terms such as 'skill' or 'competence' – to involve:

- a foundational knowledge or capability, such as reading, writing or numeracy, on which more specific skills depend
- a cultural entitlement – a practice without which a learner is impoverished in relation to culturally valued knowledge
- communication – expressing how an individual relates to culturally significant communications in a variety of media
- the need for practice – acquired through continued development and refinement in different contexts, rather than once-and-for-all mastery
- a socially and culturally situated practice – often highly dependent on the context in which it is carried out
- self-transformation - literacies (and their lack) have a lifelong, lifewide impact.

Drawing on the work of the JISC Learners' Experiences of e-Learning programme, we use the term '*effective learning'* as characteristic of '*capable, self-aware learners with the capacity to participate in learning using technologies and approaches of their own choosing'*. However, we recognise that 'effectiveness' can only properly be understood in relation to particular contexts and goals. Some of the policy statements we examine in Section 4 offer alternative or complementary versions of our definition: indeed it is characteristic of HE institutions in particular that they should develop their own account of what makes for effective learning, just as individual learners will measure effectiveness against their own values and agendas.

We use the term '*digital age'* as a shorthand for technical, social, economic, cultural and educational contexts in which digital forms of information and communication predominate. In this study and its recommendations we explore how literacy provision might adapt to fit graduates for living and working in such contexts.

Throughout, we see effective learning practice as arising not only from technical competences but also from the learner's previous experiences (Goodyear and Ellis, 2008), from dispositions such as confidence, self-efficacy and motivation (Philip, 1991), and from qualities of the environment where that practice takes place, including of course the available digital technologies (Engström, 1999).

1.3 Study methods

Our **desk review** acknowledges that significant work has already been undertaken, and is being undertaken, in the area of digital literacies. Outcomes of the review are found in sections two and three. The **data collection** element of our study acknowledges that data essential for future policy and planning in this area, particularly evidence of how UK HE and FE institutions are already responding to the need for change, is not available in the literature. The data collection methods are laid out in more detail in Section 4. They comprise:

- An audit of current institutional provision for learning literacies and key institutional drivers, barriers and reflections
- A collation of brief case studies or exemplars of forward thinking practice across HE and FE
- Consultation with key players in the sector:

- a working group of institutional representatives who were involved in the study throughout
- four public workshops at which methods and findings were checked out with self-selecting researchers and practitioners (Longbridge, Glasgow, Lancaster, Edinburgh)

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