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OPINION PIECE

More than skills: What can approaches to Digital Literacy learn from Academic Literacies?

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Abstract

Defining digital literacies is challenging because 'literacies' has been used in different ways, shifting from its association with the critical engagement with texts to encompass broader definitions relating to skills-based agendas (Lea, 2011). Support for the development of digital literacies in citizens, students and lecturers has over the last decade become a popular debate, with hundreds of digital literacy frameworks developing (for review see All Aboard!, 2015; and Hoechsmann & DeWaard, 2015). Yet, treatment of digital literacies as transferable, discrete sets of skills may not do justice to anyone. The academic literacies approach has developed from similar challenges around teaching text based skills (Lea and Street, 1998; Lea & Street, 2006; Lillis, 2006). Their consideration of the nuanced and complex practices around texts offers a sociological insight into the development of digital literacies. In this article, we contrast an academic literacies approach with JISC's current thinking around digital capabilities, followed by a discussion of the parallels between Lea and Street's (1998, 2006) academic literacies model and Bennett's Digital Practitioner Framework (Bennett, 2014; Sharpe & Beetham, 2010).

Keywords: Higher Education; Academic literacies; Digital literacies; Digital technology; Digital learning; Learning technology; Teaching practice

Introduction

Support for the development of digital literacies in citizens, students and lecturers has over the last decade become the subject of a popular debate, with many researchers, policy-makers and commentators creating digital literacy frameworks (for a review of frameworks see All Aboard!, 2015; and Hoechsmann, 2015). Defining digital literacies in itself is challenging because the term 'literacies' has been used in different ways. This ranges from the academic literacies meaning of critical engagement with texts, to a technological focus on skills-based agendas such as computer or digital literacy (e.g. European Computer Driving Licence; Dolan 1998; Lea, 2013). The academic literacies approach has developed from similar challenges around teaching text based skills and is relevant to digital literacies (Lea & Street, 1998; Lea & Street, 2006; Lillis, 2006). Their consideration of the nuanced and complex practices around texts offers a sociological insight into the development of digital literacies. In this article, we contrast an academic literacies approach with the 'digital capabilities' approach in Higher Education discourse, as promulgated by national organisations such as JISC (Joint Information Systems Committee – a UK organisation that supports digital and technological approaches in Further and Higher Education). In our discussion, we seek to draw parallels between Lea and Street's (1998, 2006) academic literacies model and Bennett's Digital Practitioner Framework (Bennett, 2014; Sharpe, & Beetham, 2010) and have created a representation of how these literacies interlace.

What are academic and digital literacies?

Academic literacies research has a robust and established framework "which has already made a significant contribution to understanding learning in a range of educational contexts, including those that are digitally mediated" (Lea, 2011, pp. 7-8). The approach shifts emphasis away from academic conventions and rules, and instead encourages an appreciation of the contested nature of academic writing, differing genres and their development, the impact of power relations on writing, the development of identity through writing, and the dynamic and pluralistic nature of academia (Lea, 1998; Lillis, 2006). Applying this sociocultural framing to digital literacy foregrounds practices in an institutional context – what academics and students actually do, and the place of the institution in its wider social context.

In Higher Education in the UK, the work of JISC defines 'digital capability' as the predominant and popular conception of digital literacy. "Digital capabilities are those capabilities that fit an individual for living, learning and working in a digital society" (JISC, 2017). But while JISC describe these capabilities as a set of situated practices that "looks beyond functional IT skills..." (JISC, 2017), the language of 'capabilities' suggests an instrumentalism in which achievement is measured solely by outcomes and where ends are taken for granted (Campbell, Kyriakides, Muijs, & Robinson, 2004). A focus on individual, primarily cognitive, skills acquisition and development sees students and academics in deficit, in need of remedial support and correction, which is then provided often in the form of generic study or skills guidance. Street (1984) argues against this deficit approach in the context of academic literacies, and Lea (2013) picks up the case against the approach in the context of digital literacy. It is a view that assumes that digital skills would be unproblematically transferable to the 'world of work', or across different contexts within a university, and that the acquisition of these skills is vital for a fully functioning 21st century university (Lea, 2013). Such an expectation of digital technology leaves little room for autonomy and agency among academic staff and students and does not lend itself to a critical and transformative approach to higher education. Thinking of digital literacies as discrete employability skills that can be packaged up and passed on to students regardless of disciplinary practices may, in fact, support broader commodification and consumerist models of education. This is where an academic literacies approach proves helpful.

Why use an academic literacies approach for digital literacies?

The ethos for taking an academic literacies approach to digital literacies comes from a belief that universities have a transformational role in society via the production and validation of knowledge; that digital literacies are emancipatory, enabling human agency in a digital society; and that we need joined up thinking not technological determinism when it comes to teaching and learning with technology (Kirkwood, 2014). Two ways in which technological determinism manifests itself in education are the utopian view of technology as a driver for educational change, and the dystopian view that technology is forced upon teachers, disrupting their way of doing things and adversely affecting the performance of students. Both views overestimate the role of technology, and underestimate human agency (Kirkwood, 2014). Brown (2017) suggests that if digital literacy is core to what it means to be a digital citizen in the 21st century, then we need to go beyond preparing people to ‘fit’ the inequitable and unjust societies that we have created. We should instead be preparing people to challenge and reshape such societies. JISC’s association of digital literacy with the demands of a ‘digital society’ may inhibit the potential for digital literacies to encourage an ethical and empowering role for teaching and learning. In this way, it matches Street’s criticism of ‘isolat[ing] literacy as an independent variable’ (Street, 1984 p.2) and minimising the role of literacy as a social practice with an ‘ideological and therefore culturally embedded nature’ (Street, 1984 p.2) (Lea, 2013).

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Universities have never been about simply preparing students for the workplace. As Mann says "Universities do not just produce 'employees', they also produce, legitimate and reproduce knowledge through research, scholarship, publication, and the accreditation and awarding of degrees" (Mann, 2008, p.123). This means that the university, in its capacity to legitimate knowledge, and by developing appropriate graduate attributes, can influence what is meant by a digital society, citizenship and literacy.

Furthermore, the joined up thinking alluded to by Kirkwood (2014) requires a consideration of technology use in context, rejecting the simplistic ‘pedagogy before technology’ dualism that misrepresents the complex weave of agents involved in education. It is difficult and unhelpful to disentangle curriculum, assessment, teaching, learning, technologies, physical learning spaces, politics, and culture. Recognising this complexity means that we can avoid “valorising either the digital or textual practice” (Lea, 2013, p.111), and in so doing avoid insisting that digital practices across disciplines are identical, and also that a digital approach is the most appropriate. An academic literacies approach means that rather than seeing academics and students as in deficit and dictating what they ought to be doing, it considers their actual practices. It gives them agency by placing them as active participants in shaping a digital world.

Shifting from individual digital skills and capabilities to situated practices

Sharpe and Beetham suggest that *practices* involve learners making informed choices about how to use technologies, and developing “flexible strategies in response to situational needs” (Sharpe & Beetham, 2010, p.175). Practices, in other words, require both a critical consideration of the pedagogic value of technology, and an agency with which to implement that decision. In support of a change in focus from digital skills to digital practices, Bennett (2014, p.117) interviewed early adopters of technology. She explored how Sharpe and Beetham’s work on students’ digital literacy could be applied to HE lecturers, and found that lecturers were not primarily motivated by digital skills development or by becoming digital practitioners; instead they wanted to achieve their pedagogic goals using digital tools where appropriate. Bennett found that lecturers first focus on the level of pedagogic practice, considering ways of teaching and learning, and then experiment with appropriate technologies to determine their value in meeting this goal (Figure 1). Emphasis on practices is therefore more meaningful and motivating for them than focusing on skills.

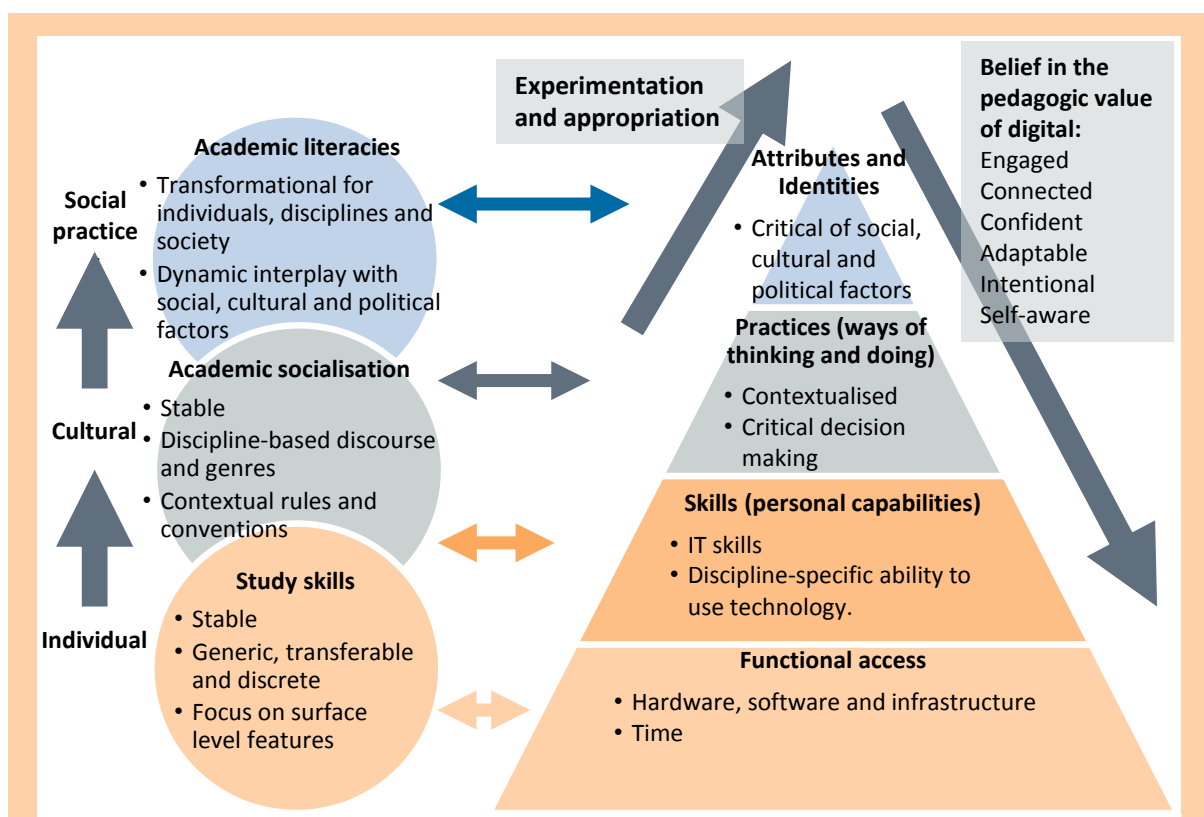


Figure 1: Drawing links between Academic Literacies (left, based on Lea & Street, 2006) and the Digital Practitioner Framework (right, based on Sharpe & Beetham, 2010; and Bennett, 2014). Both academic and digital literacy are often thought of as isolated skills (orange), including the requirement of functional access. Academic socialisation is an appreciation that practices must be contextualised within disciplinary/organisational culture (grey). A more nuanced understanding considers academic or digital literacy as a social practice, interwoven with identity, power and authority (blue). To be literate therefore requires a critical understanding of how practices interplay dynamically with social, cultural and political factors.

The academic literacies approach suggests these practices are contextualized, or situated within a discipline or community, as well as within wider society. The practice itself is adapted, modified and made relevant in accordance with factors such as access to tools and resources, and the conventions and beliefs of the community, that are in turn a balance of social interaction and power dynamics. It is therefore concerning to observe that "many efforts to propose definitions and develop related

models and frameworks are decontextualised from social and situated practice" (Brown, 2017). The *process* of co-construction of definitions by a community is as important as the outcome, and externally imposed definitions may limit meaning and reduce stakeholder buy-in (Belshaw, 2011). Thus, digital literacies need to be collaboratively defined by the community they are intended to be meaningful for, and not externally imposed.

Digital literacies should be transformational

Digital literacies have the potential to transform practices, identities and societies. In terms of practices, Kirkwood and Price (2013) suggest digital tools can be used, not just to replicate and supplement existing approaches to learning and teaching, but to transform learning and teaching. Sharpe and Beetham (P. 174, 2010) have also touched upon this transformation; suggesting that digital creation is not simply replicating writing in a digital context, but that "new technologies are changing the nature of learning and knowledge" by expanding the traditional academic form of creation – writing - into other digital media (Sharpe & Beetham, 2010, p.166). Furthermore, they suggest that the digital inspires new skills, such as 'e-collation', where information nodes must be gathered into new networks, through for example, tagging, mapping, modelling, commenting, and use of favourites. In part, this aligns with the transformational ideology of academic literacies, where one aspect of being literate is appreciating that practices around the creation and use of text are diverse, plural, and dynamic, and being empowered to critically challenge conventions around academic literature (Lea, 2006; Lillis, 2006).

In terms of identities, Sharpe and Beetham's model speaks to the sociological aspect of learning; that adopting digital practices changes how an individual sees themselves or their identity. This may be characterised by a developing confidence and motivation to consider new digital tools; and by no longer differentiating between digital and non-digital approaches, instead critically selecting a suitable approach for the task. Bennett (2014, p.4) reports that, for early adopters, digital practices have become normalized in their teaching, and they are "connected and committed to ways of working using digital tools" , in other words intrinsically, not extrinsically motivated. Bennett furthermore suggests that early adopters have become 'Post-digital', moving beyond identifying something as 'digital' or 'non-digital', instead demonstrating an appreciation of the complexity of different digital technologies, and the need to make critically informed choices. This, again, has parallels with academic literacies - the appreciation that learners, through developing ways of doing, knowing and communicating, create their own academic identity within a community of practice or discipline.

Digital literacy involves a critical approach

Sharpe and Beetham (2010) describe *practices* as requiring critical or informed choice (Figure 1, right-hand pyramid, green). Developing digital practices and digital identities requires staff and students to evaluate and choose the most appropriate tool for the task. In addition to this, the sociological approach of academic literacies requires individuals to be aware that practices are situated in socio-cultural contexts, and to ask questions of this too. For example, Brown (2017) argues:

...in exploring the underbelly and wider social practice of the concept we need to ask who is shaping the current digital literacies agenda and for what purpose? What is missing in the discourse? Whose interests are being served? Beyond a narrow focus on skills and keystrokes how might we re-envision digital literacies to promote active citizenry in order to reshape our societies to develop new ways of living, learning and working for a better future - for all?

In order to be digitally literate, we should not only look critically at the technologies we choose to use for learning and teaching, but also question how digital literacies sit within a wider social context.

Digital literacies should consider the role of power and agency in learning

Academic literacies “is concerned with ...identity, power and authority” (Lea, 2006, p.367) and in digital literacies we too should consider how these factors affect the development of digital learning. Through access, Sharpe and Beetham’s (2010) model acknowledges that learning is situated within an institution that holds the power around provision of hardware, software and time, potentially leaving individuals with little agency (Sharpe & Beetham, 2010; Bennett, 2014) (Figure 1, right-hand pyramid, blue). Sharpe and Beetham (2010) identify access as a prerequisite for engagement, demonstrating that institutions must consider the ways in which they are supporting and inhibiting access. Institutions must be aware that they have the responsibility to provide access to hardware, software and time, without which individuals cannot become digitally literate. As we have seen above, developing digital practices requires individuals to make informed critical decisions about the technologies they use, and for this, they need to have agency to trial, purchase and integrate different technologies. A consideration of the complex balances of power and agency is therefore an important component in enabling individuals to become digitally literate.

Conclusion

We have argued that approaches to digital literacies should shift their focus from skills and capabilities to digital practices. Taking an academic literacies (Lea & Street 1998, 2006) approach means looking at digital literacies from sociological and cultural perspectives; critically considering the interplay between digital literacies and social practices within academic disciplines, within the practices and culture of the institution and within the sociopolitical struggles of wider society. Digital practices are not isolated skills – they are social practices and therefore bound up with the identity, power and authority of the actors involved. Digital literacies approaches are starting to consider digital practices as more than skills and this can be expanded further to consider more critically the drivers and consequences of digital literacy, and how digitally literate individuals can in turn reshape society. Finally, the balance of power and agency between institutions and individuals will need to be considered to avoid inhibiting the ability of individuals to become digitally literate. This means for meaningful development of digital literacy in individuals and a development of a digital culture, we must embrace the nuanced understanding of digital and non-digital practices being more than digital skills - having all the complexity of a social practice within a community, including aspects of access, power and authority that build a confident digital identity.

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