Chapter 10
Toward a Working Definition of Digital Literacy

Margaret-Mary Sulentic Dowell
Louisiana State University, USA

ABSTRACT

Literacy is generally understood to be the combined abilities to read and write, speak and listen; however, the advancement of technology has broadened what it means to be literate to encompass the notion of digital literacy. This chapter is divided into four major sections. First, a comprehensive definition of digital literacy will be presented. Then, digital literacy within a socio-cultural framework will be briefly highlighted. Next, three prominent issues that have surfaced around digital literacy will be examined: the dissonance between digital natives and digital immigrants, how and why some forms of digital literacy enjoy acceptance and legitimacy, and attaining and not gaining access to digital literacy formats – the digital divide. The final section of this chapter is devoted to a discussion of implications of digital literacy in K-12 education, college, and career.

INTRODUCTION

Digital literacy (Alkali & Amichai-Hamburger, 2004; Bawden, 2008; Buckingham, 2006; Gilster, 1997) is a broad, umbrella term that pertains to the use of literacy skills defined as reading, writing, listening, speaking, composing, communicating, and interacting within digital environments. For example, accessing information and sending information via the internet such as viewing and posting YouTube videos or creating, sending, and receiving e-mails is digital literacy. As well, anime, manga, blogging, fandom blogging, texting, tweeting, designing memes, sharing headcannons, and other forms of creating ideas and communicating perspectives through social media platforms such as Facebook, twitter, Tumblr, and myriad others ways to share thoughts and opinions over the internet or in cyberspace, all qualify as digital literacy (Beach, 2012; Black, 2005; Booth, 2012; Martin & Madigan, 2006; Kist, Tollafield, & Dagistan, 2014; Rodesiler, 2015).

Also referred to as *new literacies* (Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear, & Leu, 2007; 2008; Hagood (2009), Knobel & Lankshear, 2014; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; Street, 1998), digital literacy implies both the technical ability and emotional skill level needed to generate thought and communicate in multiple formats within digital environments (Elshet-Alkalai, 2004; Landham, 1995). In particular, both the consumption and generation of text and the practices used to create and consume them, formally and informally, both outside and within school, broadly define new literacies. According to Hagood,

New literacies consist of several characteristics: (1) multimodalities, which include linguistic as well as visual, gestural, and auditory texts, (2) situated social practices, which are culturally, linguistically, and textually based, and (3) identities, which connect text users to text uses. (2009, p. 1)

BACKGROUND: A WORKING DEFINITION OF DIGITAL LITERACY

Digital literacy is a complex combination of skill sets defined as the knowledge, technical skills, use, actions, and behaviors that individuals utilize with existing myriad digital and technological devices and resultant forms of communication that have become an integral part of so many people's daily lives. For instance, every day use of a cellphone, smartphone or perhaps a tablet involve digital literacy skill sets. Thus, digital literacy implies the mastery of both the tools and embedded use of technology in personal lives. Digital literacy is also the recognition that digital forms of literacy and the aforementioned skill sets play an essential, critical role in educational and work settings, particularly the reasoned awareness regarding the content that is created and its use in digital literacy formats. Lanham (1995) argues that the notion of being literate has extended from the ability to read and write, speak and listen, to the ability to understand information that is available and accessible in multimodal ways. Being literate in the 21st century requires being skilled at interpreting complex images and discerning the "syntactical subtleties of words" (Lanham, 1995, p. 161). Whereas historically literacy has included the notion of both composing and comprehending language, defined as the ability to speak, listen, read, and write, literacy has evolved to include a "social practices" approach from scholars within the emerging educational field of New Literacies (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanic, 2000; Gee, 2001; Street, 1993).

Similar to Lanham, Alkali and Amichai-Hamburger (2004) provide an inclusive, comprehensive definition of digital literacy specifically referring to much more than the ability and skill needed to simply use and navigate a digital device or software, rather, digital literacy requires complex thinking skills as well as critical decision-making ability. The kind of multifaceted thinking required of digital literacy equates to the knowledge beyond how to operate digital devices, access information, or utilize software and refers to the complicated cognitive abilities, requisite motor skills, as well as the sociological and emotional maturity needed to navigate digital environments effectively, usefully, and appropriately. A conceptual model detailed by the authors proposes that digital literacy encompasses five essential digital skills: photo-visual skill – gaining understanding from graphic displays of information; reproduction skill – wherein individuals employ digital reproduction expertise to recreate or craft innovative, significant materials from pre-existing materials; branching skills – defined as building and fashioning knowledge from non-linear, hypertextual navigation); information skills – both assessing and gauging the quality and legitimacy of information), and socio-emotional skills – the mindfulness of the tacit rules that exist and are in place in cyberspace and being able to apply this awareness in online cyberspace communications (Alkali & Amichai-Hamburger, 2004).

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