
MARTIN, Allan and MADIGAN, Dan (eds.) *Digital Literacies for Learning*. London: Facet Publishing. 2006. 268 pages. ISBN 978-1856045636 £39.95.

In the 21st century digital tools allow information to be generated faster and in greater quantity than ever before, to the point where the term "information overload" becomes really meaningful. Without digital literacy the ever increasing torrent of information cannot be understood by mere human beings. So what is "digital literacy", and, in the absence of it, can one be described as "digitally illiterate"?

Digital Literacies for Learning, from Facet Publishing, examines ways in which students can be enabled to successfully learn in the technological and digital global environment. The editors, Allan Martin and Dan Madigan, state that their intention behind the book "is to explore some of those 'literacies' through which individuals can understand and develop their engagement with the digital, particularly (but not exclusively) in educational settings". The book is for "all those who are concerned with the participation of individuals as literate citizens and engaged learners in the 'information society', or whatever we call a culture that is infused with the digital".

The book includes contributions from twenty-five authors from nine countries and four continents and the editors say that this means that readers will enjoy a variety of writing styles, although, on the negative side, this can be interpreted as being a certain irritating unevenness of style.

The book is divided into two parts - in effect it is the now formulaic approach of a first part exploring the title subject matter and the second part a hotchpotch of case-studies. The first part explores more general issues concerning the nature of the 'digital age' and the various literacies that enable individuals to survive in such a 'cultural milieu'. It seeks to deal with the landscape of digital literacy, learning and teaching environments and e-learning covering the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) and the transformation from traditional educational environments to the e-learning environment. The second part is about enabling and supporting digital literacies with some examples of the development of 'digital literacies' in practice, as well as discussions about some of the issues that arise as a result of these practices.

In Part One, chapter one, editor Alan Martin gives a preview to the first part beginning with an introduction to the "digital society" and how the world of the 21st century is "digitally infused", an e-world, with e-business, e-commerce, e-health, e-government, e-learning - where e is pervasive - e-everything in other words (an "e" from this reviewer!). The section covers ideas of digital technologies, technological revolution, information society, including a notion, that "with digital games, mobile phones, and iPods, a growing generation of 'digital natives' do not use digital technology to engage with reality, but to insulate themselves from it." Martin explains how literacy in the middle ages meant an ability to read and write and the idea of a learned person participating in

the activities of the community of the literate - the literati. He explores how this definition of literacy has changed substantially since the middle ages and, in the rise of the industrial society, middle class literacy was also a functionality linked to their management roles of industrial society. This evolved into the latter half of the twentieth century view of a deficit model of “illiteracy” which focussed on “remediating” the problems of “deprived” groups or individuals. But now there are the new literacies”, covered in detail by Martin, of ICT, technological, information, media, and visual literacy. Digital literacy, it seems, is “the integrating concept of an ability to understand and use information in multiple formats from a wide range of courses when presented via computers”. The other ten chapters in the first part of this book include “Learners, learning literacy and the pedagogy of e-learning” from Terry Mayes and Chris Fowler, which includes a consideration of Wenger’s recent call for a new discourse based on the “horizontalization” of learning, “Real learning in virtual environments”, from Johannes Cronjé, which includes the “role of metaphor”. Clair Bélisle deals with “Literacy and the digital knowledge revolution”, through “Rethinking literacy through the autonomous model or functional literacy”, “Literacy as a socio-cultural practice”, and “The strong claim of literacy as intellectual empowerment”. Maryann Kope takes another crack at “Understanding e-literacy” - this chapter’s headings become confusing - “Information literacy”, “Computer literacy”, “Academic literacy”, “Academic literacy and information literacy”, “Academic literacy and computer literacy” - ending with one of those “Towards an understanding...” headings, which tends to suggest that we don’t actually understand anyway! Chris Sutton’s rather lengthily titled “Literacy, e-literacy and multiliteracies: meeting the challenges of teaching online” proved a welcome oasis of practicality before stepping once again into the theoretical quagmire. One of those lovely facts from this chapter - Did you know that online learners in Australia are predominantly middle-aged women? Neither did I. But this chapter makes the critical observation that many do not wish to know or accept - and that is that there is a lack of digital competence and multiliteracies among both learners **and teachers**. Whilst I am frequently turned off by results of uninteresting surveys, there is an extremely illuminating survey (2004) drawn from people looking for a career change, up-skilling, or seeking to move into self-employment - presumably including the middle-aged Australian ladies. It revealed quite high numbers that could not carry out simple, but essential, computer tasks, such as understanding computer terms such as “click”, “select” or “drag”, knowing what a PDF file is, installing or copying files from a CD-ROM, understanding webcams, or understanding what to do if a basic plug-in such as Adobe Acrobat was not installed.

This book is set out very much like conference proceedings. Each chapter begins with an abstract, which in many cases is vastly over-long for a chapter of a few pages in length; followed by an introduction, the body of the chapter; a conclusion, and references and further reading. One would never wish, in a book of this type, to find it inadequately referenced - but there should be a happy medium. For example one chapter is six pages in length, excluding the abstract, but has two full pages of references and further reading. There is unevenness in this referencing. Editor Martin’s 18 pages of introductory “Literacies for the

digital age: preview of part 1” has over three pages of references, whereas co-editor Madigan’s 7 page introduction to Part two - “Supporting and enabling digital literacy in a global environment: preview of part 2” - has no references at all!

Part two includes “A ‘dense symphony of the nation’: Cymru Ar-Lein and e-citizens and e-communities in Wales” from Stephen Griffiths. By the time this chapter has waded through its introduction, sets out the geography of Wales (“air routes practically non-existent”), discussed the economy, bilingualism and the political settlement, talked about “initiatives” and the ICT infrastructure, and looked at e-communities, one hits the conclusion wondering if one has missed the point. Other chapters include “The impact of information competencies on socio-economic development in Southern Hemisphere economies”, “The information commons: a student-centred environment for IT and information literacy development”, and “Professional development and graduate students: approaches to technical and information competence”, but my special prize for the longest chapter title in the book goes to “Windward in an asynchronous world: the Antiguan initiative, unanticipated pleasures of the distance learning revolution”. Martin Jenkins refreshingly short-titled “Supporting students in e-learning” is a to-the-point, informative piece which looks at why support should be integral to e-learning provision and covering practical issues such as retention, access and widening participation, competition and a student’s choice of institution. A piece of worth-while practical, thought-proving reading!

The book is nicely bound and is well laid out with well spaced lines of text. The use of a large amount of bold type, mainly in the Contents, could have looked awful but actually looks quite pleasing and adds to clarity. The few illustrations, tables and charts are appropriate to make a point, and are not over-used.

The editors say that this book is “one bite at the apple of making the digital amenable to understanding and thereby to responsible control and empowering usage.” (How I hate “digital” being used as a noun!) The reader may well find that they need a lot more than one bite at this wordy apple - to the extent that they suffer indigestion!

I come from the Further Education Sector, working in a college in an extremely deprived area of London, where there are rather a lot of students with learning difficulties, students whose first language is not English, and whose English is very poor, and quite a number of students who have “challenging behaviour”. If you are like me, working at the coalface, wanting a book that provides answers, or, at least some inspiration towards answers, then *Digital Literacies for Learning* is probably not a book for you. Its wordiness and sociological terminology has left me feeling positively illiterate, and, dare I say, e-xhausted!

However, the book will have those who will appreciate its value. If one digs deep through its wordiness, gems can be found - such as those that I have mentioned. The views on illiteracy through the ages are interesting and the reader ought to be able to define the digital literacies when they have ploughed through this book. It

is a book for the researcher, for those who are exploring the modern phenomenon of digital literacy, and seeking enlightenment. But they will need to work hard to extract the information. I am quite confident that this will be found to be a useful resource book, with many useful quotations and references - but it is more for those who are examining the subject at a more distant or theoretical level than for those at 'coalface'.

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