

The Research and Practice in Adult Literacy Network

Who we are

RaPAL is an independent national network of learners, teachers, managers and researchers engaged in adult literacies and numeracy. Our support is generated by membership subscription only, and we are therefore completely independent in our views. RaPAL is the only national organisation focusing on the role of literacies in adult life.

What we do

- Campaign for the rights of adults to have access to the full range of literacies in their lives
- Critique current policy and practice where it is based on simplistic notions of literacy as skill
- Emphasise the importance of social context in literacy
- Encourage collaborative and reflective research
- Believe in democratic practices in adult literacy
- Create networks by organising events (including an annual conference) to contribute to national debate
- Publish a journal three times a year

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Members are involved in the compilation of the journal as reviewers/referees and editors.

We are a friendly group - open to new members and new ideas. Please contact us with any contributions (views, comments, reports and articles) and do not be put off if you are new to the field or if you have not written for a publication before. This Journal is written by and for all learners, tutors and researchers who want to ask questions about this field of work. It does not matter if the questions have been asked before. We want to reflect the many voices within adult literacy and numeracy work and to encourage debate.

Why not join in?

Further information can be found at our website: www.rapal.org.uk

The RaPAL Journal expresses a variety of views which do not necessarily reflect those of the editorial group. The RaPAL Journal has been printed by Image Printing Co., Lumsdale, Matlock, Derbyshire. Matlock, Derbyshire.

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Editorial

Bex Ferriday, Sarah Freeman and Jim Mullan

Bex is a Lead Teacher in Education and Training at Cornwall College; Sarah is an Adult Literacy teacher and teacher trainer in Sutton College of Learning for Adults, South London; Jim Mullan is a teacher educator at Queen's University, Belfast.

Welcome to this edition of the RaPAL journal. Our theme is digital literacy and its implications for the literacies which adult literacy educators draw on to teach effectively and learners need to become more proficient in present day communication. It makes sense then to set the scene with an overview of what digital literacy is and how this relatively new notion has emerged.

As O'Keefe (2011) says:

We live in a world of rapidly evolving technological development which is changing the way in which we communicate, in both our working and social lives. Young people, in particular, tend to be comfortable with this and know only a multimodal world where images, sounds and gesture play as important a role as the written word.

There is a growing belief that technology is responsible for a decline in traditional standards in literacy. McKeown et al (2010) challenge this view and claim that people with poor educational experiences are motivated by new technologies before putting forward a persuasive case for how new technology, by combining text, images, symbols and sound, can help support and develop reading in adults who have experienced difficulty with traditional reading. O'Keefe posits that reading on screen is a more interactive and social activity which allows readers more control over their reading before going on to state that the rise in 'read-write' technologies such as social networking, blogging and wikis enable users to read and write in a more interactive and dynamic way than ever before.

Clearly, this has huge implications for education, so it is important to find out more about the digital literacy practices of learners and their perceptions of these practices.

But what exactly *is* digital literacy?

Despite a plethora of literature about the new digital age and its implications for education in the 21st century, a single definition of digital literacy does not exist. This can be attributed in part to the fact that new digital literacies are evolving all the time.

For this reason Gillen and Barton's (2009) social practice approach makes sense. Their broad definition: '*Digital Literacies are the constantly changing practices through which people make traceable meanings using digital technologies*' (p.1) suggests that people learn how to use these new technologies informally and apply this learning in their everyday lives without consciously learning.

Many of our adult learners use new technology, mainly for the purposes of communication and entertainment. Research confirms they do read and write through new digital media and the skills employed to carry out these tasks have been informally learnt. These practices are part and parcel of their everyday lives but are not skills they associate with formal learning.

The challenge for tutors is to integrate these digital literacy practices into their teaching and build on the informal learning of our learners. Helping the learners to see the value in these skills and how they can be applied in the wider work environment as well as through play should increase their confidence and enable them to take control of their own learning.

By drawing together a varied and very interesting series of articles from practitioners, teacher trainers and researchers in Adult Literacy who have used or observed the use of others of digital literacies, we hope that practitioners can empower their own learners via the honing of digital literacy skills. Their articles together give a very striking picture of how ingrained and essential the application of digital communication has become in everyone's lives in the UK.

We have found it really exciting to receive and work with these articles and several reviews on similar topics at a time when Facebook, Twitter, email, texting, blogging and virtual communication media are becoming charged with all sorts of burning issues be they social, political or educational. RaPAL was started in the nineties to enable literacy practitioners to stay abreast with ideas about literacy and social practices instead of literacy as per the definitions of accreditation systems such as Wordpower or its successor Skills for Life. It is therefore very relevant to observe how not only the tools of literacy but its very modes of communication and the culture it generates are all becoming steeped in electronic (as an offshoot of 'social') practices.

Moving to the articles that make up this edition, we start with Section 1: *Voices from the Classroom*. This consists of three brief but fascinating articles by Michelle Treagust, Sarah Freeman and Roberta Scott respectively. Michelle looks at the use of eBook readers, digital texts and electronic, interactive games with emerging readers while Sarah provides a very honest insight that examines how older learners taking part in a blogging activity have become so adept at using a mouse they now use this extension of their hand skillfully and more naturally than the keyboard. Roberta, a student now graduating from her specialist Numeracy teaching course in Belfast, uses

an innovative form of summative reflection through a wordle (a word cloud) and an image.

In Section 2: *Developing Research and Practice*, Cathy Clarkson provides an extremely useful update to her summer 2010 article looking at using blogs within teacher education. In reflection she looks back at the drawbacks of *Moodle* as a communication tool, before going on to recount her experiences of changing to a more 'blogcentric' application - namely *posterous* - as a way of forming and maintaining both a community of practice and a way of communicating and sharing ideas and issues outside of the classroom. Bex Ferriday then goes on to look at her experiences of delivering an Initial Teacher Training course in the virtual world *Second Life*, and how digital literacy skills were developed then honed naturally and communally within the cohort.

In Section 3: *Research and Practice: Multidisciplinary Perspectives* we read how teachers and researchers interact with online practices. Nick Haigh describes the literacy practices of his adult literacy and ESOL diploma students and suggests that digital engagement and ability levels of learners (and indeed, practitioners) are explicitly linked to their levels of confidence, life history and social situation.

In 'Email as "Literacy-in-Action"' Ellayne Fowler reviews findings from a doctoral research project that investigated the social practices around the use of email in a Further Education setting. Ellayne argues that in researching digital literacies we need to refine our theoretical tools beyond the 'literacy event' and that research findings should inform practitioners' teaching practice to enable learners to embrace ever-evolving digital literacies.

In her article, Irene Schwab asks the question: 'What do adult literacy learners read online and how do their teachers support them?' She writes about her involvement in a small-scale research project that looked at the reading of online texts and the interaction that electronic texts provide - with the 'passive reader' now regularly able to become a more 'active editor'.

The fourth article from Kate Pahl - 'Fusing the Digital with the Non-digital' provides an eye witness account from outside the classroom. We are privileged to get a report of observation of the digital practices of a Bradford Asian family through their everyday life at home, school and work in Yorkshire, and, intriguingly, through the development of a building project in Pakistan.

This journal has been rich in contributions about digital literacies and the book reviews are no exception with two out of three reviews on aspects of digital worlds. The recent proliferation in publications about developments in digital communications means adult literacy and digital literacy teachers and researchers will have no shortage of reading to do when they have finished reading this journal!

We hope you enjoy reading all of this as much as we have enjoyed putting it together and that it provides, at the very least, a starting point for your own understanding and practice within the ever-shifting realms of digital literacy.

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