

Introduction

Digital Literacy and Multimodal Practices of Young Children: Engaging with emergent research

Íris Pereira and Altina Ramos

This ebook came out of a Training School (TS) that was held as part of COST Action IS1410 - The Digital Literacy and Multimodal Practices of Young Children (DigiLitEY).

DigiLitEY is a multidisciplinary European research network aiming to examine how 0-8 year-old children's literacy experience and learning are being shaped by changes brought about by the digitisation of communication. It pursues a many-fold research agenda, which, for the purposes of this introduction, can be summarised as follows (cf. Sefton-Green, Marsh, Erstad & Flewitt, 2016):

1. To acknowledge and develop relevant theories in understanding change and continuity in children's digital literacies;
2. To systematise (and envisage) research on:
 - a. digital literacy practices of young children in homes and communities;
 - b. the definition and assessment of literacy and/or literacies in early-years settings, primary schools and informal learning settings as well as the characterisation of the pedagogy of digital literacy;
 - c. digital meaning making;
 - d. the increasing integration of the online and offline domains for young children's digital literacy practices and worlds .
3. To create a knowledge base on research methodologies and ethical issues.

By targeting these aims and producing scientific research, DigiLitEY intends to contribute to the enhancement of the very social circumstances that first stirred its emergence. Particularly relevant are the intentions to influence the enactment of safe and effective playful and creative digital meaning making among young children either in formal or informal settings; prompt government policies that impact on the development of school socially responsive and all-inclusive curricula; and to inform and inspire theories that look into childhood from sociological and cultural perspectives.

When we proposed to host the 1st DigiLitEY TS at the Institute of Education of University of Minho, in Portugal, we were aware of the complexity of what was at stake. We knew that training schools intend to be spaces in which PhD students and Early Career Investigators are

acquainted with established experts in the field, and also provide space for networking and sharing and discussion of ongoing research which is, or has been, carried out by young researchers. Besides, we also realised that the 1st TS had already been projected as a specific contribution to the systematisation (and envisaging) of research on digital literacy and multimodal practices of young children (aim 2, above).

The 1st DigiLitEY TS took place from 6th - 8th June, 2016. We welcomed 21 selected trainees from 12 different COST countries: Paulina Barańska (Poland), Marco Bento, Rita Brito (Portugal), Angela Colvert (United Kingdom), Helene Dahlström (Sweden), Patrícia Dias (Portugal), Nieves Galera (Spain), Habib Güneşli (Germany), Helle Hovgaard Jørgensen (Denmark), Skúllína Hlíf Kjartansdóttir (Iceland), Maria Ana Medeiros (Portugal), Inge Merkelbach (The Netherlands), Pekka Mertala (Finland), Thilde Emilie Møller (Denmark), Ana Francisca Monteiro (Portugal), Sari Räisänen (Finland), Saara Salomaa (Finland), Burcu Sari (Turkey), Fiona Louise Scott (United Kingdom), Cristina Sylla (Portugal) & Phil Wilkinson (United Kingdom). Some trainees were PhD students, while others had already completed their PhDs and were Early Career Investigators. We invited four keynotes, two from the UK, Jackie Marsh and Gunther Kress, and two from Portugal, António Moreira and Nelson Zagalo, who shared their theoretical insights on digital literacy practices in families, multimodal communication and meaning making, transformed pedagogies and videogames.

Finally, we also welcomed several Portuguese trainers, some closely related to DigiLitEY (Lúcia Amante, Isabel Alexandre, Maria Manuel Borges, Ádila Faria, António Osório, Cristina Ponte), others less so but still having knowledge and experiences worthwhile sharing (Pedro Branco, Carlos Moreira, José Moura de Carvalho and Fernando Franco).

This ebook presents trainees' research papers as well as essays authored by keynotes and trainers. It was thought of as the final part of the TS, indeed a necessary one, so that current trends in emergent research on the digital literacy and multimodal practices of young children are widely shared and the whole DigiLitEY network is able to engage with them. As such we believe that this ebook is of potential interest for new as well as senior researchers.

Part 1 includes all the 21 papers presented during the TS. Our brief analysis of the abstracts supported by NVivo clearly shows the overall strong relevance of the research presented during the TS as well as the richness that each paper brought to the DigiLitEY's agenda. Words represented in larger font in Figure 1, below, point into central themes traversing the on-going investigations presented, whereas smaller ones, featuring as less recurrent among the whole set of words in the abstracts (and, therefore, more atomised among papers), identify the fine points of research which each of the researchers are digging into (or have recently done so).

Some interesting conclusions can be

Another conclusion concerns the non-balanced weight among research objects and interests. A slight majority of papers addresses educational-pedagogical matters, either in pre-school or primary school settings (though none explicitly and directly involving informal learning spaces

10

digital resources. In Colvert's and Salomaa's cases, there is a clear intention in contributing to the development of relevant theoretical models.

Family digital literacy practices are the object of study of a considerable number of investigations. Some intend to depict the role of digital media in children's lives (Barańska), with a look into children's digital devices and competences (Brito & Dias). Other research focuses on children's online activities, highlighting children's perceptions about opportunities and risks (Brito, Monteiro et al.). Some research further expands these concerns by developing sociological approaches to the study of family digital practices. In such cases researchers want to understand how digital literacy practices have impacted on routines and forms of socialisation of families with young children (Galera), how the living and educational media environment of children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds are shaped by digital experiences (Güneşli), and the effects of social class upon children's home practices with TV and related media (Scott). In one case, there is research on an intervention into the promotion of digital capabilities among disadvantaged families (Wilkinson). In these later cases, there is a concern with surfacing social inequities concerning children's digital experience at home as well as the necessity and possibility to overcome such inequalities in children's (and families') own interests.

The integration of online and offline

domains for young children's digital literacy practices and worlds is at issue in several papers. There is research on how play is being impacted by children's digital experiences, either at pre-school (Dahlström) or at home (Scott), how formal learning practices are being reconceptualised and transformed by the integration of digital features (Colvert, Medeiros, Mertala), and the role of online spaces in the construction of children's identities and cultures (Monteiro et al.).

The impact of multimodality upon young children's meaning making process is the clear focus of three papers, revealing research on children's writing of narrative texts (Dahlström), collaborative film making (Møller) and the learning of vocabulary (Sari et al.).

In Part two, the ebook offers four essays authored by Keynotes and trainers. Amante and Ponte address issues related to family literacy practices. Amante centres her attention on parental mediation, pinpointing different forms of mediation and highlighting the role that further research on emergent media habits may play in fostering parents' roles as an educational opportunity for children. Ponte, on the other hand, points out how the so-called "weird" families label prevails in research "to catalogue the disadvantages faced by particular social groups at the expense of considering their strengths" (Ponte, this volume) and invites research to embrace a more holistic approach, more aware of the social diversity of the families and how contents and contexts interact.

Moreira addresses pedagogical issues in his essay. He offers a reflective overview of the pros and cons of (mis)using digital toys in early stages of learning, arguing about the role of non-intrusive digital toys and playing in forging engaging opportunities that set the foundations for the development of digital literacies. He also identifies a set of principles sustaining pedagogical uses of ICT's in children's learning contexts from an early age.

Pereira focuses on reading on screens. She identifies multimodality, interconnectivity and interaction as three central features of digital texts and discusses the possibilities and requirements they pose on digital meaning making, which she highlights by comparing to reading 'on paper'. She also identifies relevant research questions about young children's digital reading.

The professional significance of organising this TS will be enduring for both of us. The most outstanding revelation was the surfacing of the complexity that is intrinsic to DigiLitEY's research object. There is great diversity of circumstances in which children experience, learn and develop digital literacy and multimodal communication in COST countries that have joined in this Action. Countries are far from being alike in what concerns to the political, pedagogical, cultural, linguistic, social or in economic terms that frame the digital literacy practices of young citizens. The TS has also put in evidence a great

diversity in the epistemological frameworks that are used to make meaning out of empirical data, ranging from sociocultural understandings of early literacy learning, theories of multimodality and work in the field of media literacy but also notably including New Literacy Studies, cognitivist theories of digital meaning making, play theories as well as sociological theories and cultural theories on childhood and child cultures.

Organising this TS was a big challenge for both of us and it received a globally positive assessment. The help we got from COST, CIEd (Research Centre on Education) and IE (Institute of Education of University of Minho) was essential in making it possible. We would, however, like to underline that without Jackie Marsh's active and enduring support it would not have happened. She well deserves our biggest Thank you!

Íris Susana Pires Pereira & Altina Ramos

Braga, Portugal, October 2016

Reference

Sefton-Green, J., Marsh, J., Erstad, O. & Flewitt, R. (2016). Establishing a Research Agenda for the Digital Literacy Practices of Young Children: a White Paper for COST Action IS1410 [accessed: <http://digilitey.eu>].