

**Response of the National Literacy Trust to: Lifelong Learning and Technological Change: 'The Independent Commission of Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning', sponsored by NIACE.**

The National Literacy Trust (NLT) is an independent charity that changes lives through literacy. The National Literacy Trust links home, school and the wider community to inspire learners and create opportunities for everyone. We support those who work with learners through our innovative programmes, information and research. We bring together key organisations to lead literacy promotion in the UK.

We focus on:

- **Empowering learners-** programmes such as Reading is Fundamental (RIF), promote a love of reading among children and young people in areas of disadvantage.
- **Supporting professionals-** our campaigns and initiatives aim to influence practice and enable professionals to work more effectively to improve literacy skills and the enjoyment of reading.
- **Influencing policy and practice-** we emphasise a partnership approach, in which whole communities work together to improve individuals' enjoyment of reading and literacy skills. However, we also recognise that this needs to operate within a systems approach; looking at the system as a whole, seeing how the pieces interrelate and working out the most effective way to move forward.

## Our response

### Summary:

- **Static/dynamic concept of literacy** - technological change has developed the static set of skills that literacy has traditionally been considered to be. Speaking, listening, reading and writing are undergoing significant change as technology develops.
- **Issues surrounding access and opportunity** - technology has raised questions about the digital divide, and different groups suffering exclusion from opportunity as a result. However, it has also transformed the learning experience of those with certain disabilities, such as dyslexia.
- **Public and private confidence** - research commissioned by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in 2007, found that children expressed more confidence in their reading abilities in private than when reading in public. Technology, particularly the internet, may provide a space for private reading, linked to a forum for public expression.

### 1) **Static/dynamic:**

Technology has changed and will continue to change how learners experience literacy. The authority of written texts online requires more extensive validation, meaning critical literacy skills are more significant. The proliferation of media for communication - texting, chat rooms, email - has spawned new forms of language and new tones of voice that users need to be master and understand in order to read and write in the respective media. Reading and writing online is a more social and potentially exposed activity requiring new skills in safely managing communication in an interactive environment.

In this new dynamic technological context, literacy is changing from a more traditional static set of skills to the ability to read, write, speak and listen effectively in a world where human contact itself has been redefined. Contrary to popular belief, these new skills can have a positive effect on literacy achievements, as long as the difference in

style and form is fully understood by the learner.<sup>1</sup> Increased prominence and potential benefits of new forms of literacy highlight the fundamental role technological change will play in literacy in the future.

The new challenge is for the teaching of literacy to accommodate this. More complex literacy skills need to be embedded in the curriculum and informal learning. Technology has not just changed the teaching of literacy; it has changed its definition.

## **2) Access and opportunity**

Technological change has brought about improved learning access and opportunities, but it also presents significant challenges.

Advances in computing and other technologies have provided improved learning opportunities for people with disabilities such as dyslexia. Coloured screens, and other computer based advances, have provided people with learning experiences that were previously unavailable. The experience of literacy, which was previously a significant challenge for pupils with SEN, has been reinvigorated as opportunities have led to far greater inclusion.

However, the prominence of computers in learning has increased concern about a digital divide; a divide between those who are computer and technology literate, and those who are left behind. This has particular resonance for lifelong learning as computers, television and other forms of technology provide the cheapest and easiest way to provide educational opportunity. As new forms of literacy gain increasing prominence and the style, tone and form of digital literacy becomes ever more commonplace, there is a danger that while some are becoming increasingly enfranchised by the changes, others are becoming excluded.

It is vital that learning providers are aware of the radical changes that technology has brought to literacy. Providers must recognise that this radical reshaping does not only exist in terms of computer literacy and basic understandings of technology, but that there are equally significant shifts in the experience and definition of literacy.

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<sup>1</sup> Coventry University (2006) *Children, Texts and Learning*.

### **3) Public and private confidence**

A recent study commissioned by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that children expressed very different public and private confidence in their own reading ability.<sup>2</sup> Many of the children asked stated that they were more confident in understanding texts when reading on their own. The children said that reading in public not only caused them to struggle more with the act of reading, but that their comprehension suffered as well. This affected the children's confidence and consequently their enjoyment and attainment suffered. These results have led to a discourse about the relationship between pupils' private and public confidence in reading. While the study focused on young people, the findings may well translate across to lifelong learning for adults.

Technological change presents the possibility of helping learners overcome difficulties with public confidence. Opportunities afforded by the internet, blogging and other interactive media allow people to read in private, build up their understanding, then express the acquired knowledge in a public forum. Some university courses already require pupils to carry out discussions online as a requisite for passing a module. This carries the dual benefit of allowing students to explain their sentiments in their own time, and also gives course leaders the time to fully assess what has been written.

Expressions of private confidence in public forums, as well as increased familiarity with new styles of literacy are important, however the disappearance of inter personal communication from learning entirely would be hugely detrimental. The use of technology at home, in learning centres and in the work place, has reduced the need for spoken interaction. While enhancing learning through explorations of private confidence is beneficial, basic communication skills remain relevant, and both prescribed and informal learning need to continue to encourage the development of these skills.

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<sup>2</sup> Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2007) *Children researching links between poverty and literacy*