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Gemma Clare explores the responsibilities and opportunities for children surrounded by technology



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While there has been an increased focus on computer science recently, the new computing curriculum encompasses more than just programming. There is also a requirement for children to become 'digitally literate' – but what is digital literacy, and why is it important?

Our lives have become saturated with digital content. Both adults and children are surrounded by it and regularly consume multiple technologies. Many pupils will use digital technologies and media as an important part of their lives. This is one significant reason why teaching children how to use and understand technology is fundamental, so they can effectively engage with the devices they use on a consistent basis.

Another key reason for exposing children to digital literacy is to keep them safe, which is an additional requirement of the computing curriculum. Without being taught about the reliability of internet sources, how to email and blog respectfully and how to respond to things that make them feel uncomfortable such as offensive social media comments, children are at risk when using their digital devices.

There is some debate as to what digital literacy actually means. On a basic level, it can be seen as pupils being able to 'read', use and understand a variety of digital devices and content. 'Reading' can be seen as a wider term for making meaning of and interpreting information, outside the boundaries of printed word.

'Digital literacies' can be defined by any digital content that can be 'read' for meaning. This includes films, eBooks, blogs, radio, graphic design and other multimodal texts. Exposing children to these texts and giving them opportunities to read, interpret and create them themselves is a way to prepare children to be citizens in our increasingly digital world.

Using a variety of ways to display information, such as using moving image and a voice-over simultaneously, can also engage children by connecting with both their visual and auditory channels. This is likely to appeal to a wider range of learning styles and scaffold children's learning by giving them a greater range of content to understand. For example, an audio track describing the water cycle may become more effective when combined with an animation showing the process. Vice versa, an image of the water cycle may be enhanced by verbal information or text.

Aside from reading and finding meaning in digital content, digital literacy education additionally embodies children being able to use and understand computers, alongside creating their own content through computers and tablets. Therefore, teaching children code is also enabling them to communicate and create in more ways than one.

There are many ways to integrate digital literacy into a classroom. Exposure to a variety of digital media such as films can lead to children reading for meaning through channels such as image and sound. In my experience, using a motivating stimulus such as this also leads to children creating wonderful digital literacies themselves. Allowing children the opportunity to read and create blogs, podcasts and other content will enable them to fully engage with digital literacy and help to prepare them for their future lives and workplaces.

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