

Welcome to the Journal of eLiteracy!

A new academic journal represents a community of practice seeking to identify, and to understand, itself and its concerns, and to share them with others. According to Wenger and his colleagues, “A community of practice is not just a web site, a database, or a collection of best practices. It is a group of people who interact, learn together, build relationships, and in the process develop a sense of belonging and mutual commitment.” (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002: 34) This journal is a further step forward in development of the community of practice which began to come together at the eLit conferences from 2002 on – the first two in Glasgow, the third, reported on in these pages, in New York. That community is concerned with the empowerment of learners through the literacies associated with living in digital environments.

Is *e* the spectre which haunts the 21st century? Whether we approve of it or not, it has become a ubiquitous prefix: eCommerce, eServices, eGovernment, eVoting, eVillages, eLearning, eLeisure to give just a few examples. It is easy to sneer at the ready adoption of *e* as just a fad, but linguistic usage, at least in open societies, persists by and large through utility and meaningfulness. Even if it's not precise, we know what sort of things *e* is pointing to: if we refer to eGovernment, it is recognised that we are talking about the adoption of digital facilities or techniques into the sphere of political process. In fact, perhaps the lack of precision is its strength: eGovernment isn't about a particular way of evolving political processes through use of digital facilities and tools, it's about any or all of the ways of doing it. In a world – the eWorld? – where any area of life can be affected by information and communications technology, the *e* prefix (can we call it the *efix*?) helps to get some focus on the bits that concern us. The eWorld is pervasive and global, and for an increasing proportion of the world's population a fact rather than a choice.

The eWorld is not of course an unmitigated good: there is perversion as well as pervasion. The eWorld is part of the societal shift identified as the emergence of the “postmodern” era. Thus, Kenneth Gergen (1991) argues that the multiplicity of interconnections which current technology has enabled creates the saturated self, the self so impinged upon by opinions, ideas, habits, lifestyles of others that the unified self gives way to one which is defined by others, and whose goals are more diffuse, polymorphous and ephemeral.

With the proliferation of communication technologies we are first exposed to an ever-expanding vocabulary of being. No longer do we dwell within the boundaries of a single geographically contained community, a region, an ethnicity or even a culture. We have not a single satisfying intelligibility within which to dwell, but through the process of social saturation, we are immersed in a plethora of understandings - the psychological ontologies of varying ethnicities, class strata, geographical sectors, racial and religious groupings, professional enclaves, and nationalities. We are exposed to the argots of the streets, the laboratories, the drawing rooms, the brothels, and so on, each with their particular and peculiar turns of self-expression. Further, because the technologies enable otherwise marginal groups to locate the like minded - from across the country - and to articulate and publicize (if not proselytize) more broadly, one encounters well articulated ontologies reinforced by large and determined numbers. (Gergen, 1996: 4)

eLearning is one of the more oft-used e-words. Like others, the meaning is imprecise but the scope is clear. There's a wide range of matter of very varying character, and a healthy debate about what eLearning is, and a less healthy debate about whether particular items or types of item are true or false examples of eLearning. New journals are opening up to host the debate, such as *eLearning* (<http://www.triangle.co.uk/ELEA/>), the *Electronic Journal of eLearning* (<http://www.ejel.org>), the *International Journal on E-Learning* (<http://www.aace.org/pubs/IJEL>), and *eLearning Journal* (<http://it.dadeschools.net/ejournal>). This blanket term is a healthy one, in encompassing within it the full range of ways in which digital environments are transforming education. It is all understood and widely used.

In thinking about eLiteracy we find many similarities to other e-areas: an area of activity rendered crucial by the evolution of digital environments for living and for learning; robust debate on issues of definition of the field, and the priority of one concept over another; theoretical and practical streams of influence merging from disparate sources; emergent gurus seeking to establish themselves; and ongoing organisational changes bringing together groups who never wanted to talk to each other.

We can define “eLiteracy” simply as referring to the awarenesses, skills, understandings, and reflective approaches necessary for an individual to operate comfortably in information-rich and IT-enabled environments. But this definition opens up many more questions: what do we mean by awarenesses, skills, etc., what are the awarenesses, skills, etc. that people need, do different people need different awarenesses, skills, etc., what are information-rich and IT-enabled environments, and what does it mean to operate comfortably with them. Much of the existing debate over eLiteracy has focused on these aspects, and has been driven by IT specialists or librarians, the former coming from very practical concerns with computer and later IT literacy, the latter influenced by the evolution from the 1980s of “bibliographic instruction” and “user education” into “information literacy”. Much of the debate has concentrated on rather narrow questions concerning competing lists of competences of either IT or information literacy. There are however other sources of insight targeted upon eLiteracy questions which will raise the horizon of debate onto broader issues.

One is the movement of the study of literacy, in the traditional sense which one would associate with reading and writing, towards recognising, and encompassing additional and newer forms of literacy, particularly those which have been stimulated by new technologies. Literacy studies have, over the last thirty years, freed themselves from being necessarily concerned with the mechanics of reading and writing, or with deprivation models of *illiteracy*. They have embraced the notion that literacy is a dynamic factor within the social and cultural structure and that questions of literacy have more to do with social-cultural situations than with the psychology of reading. Literacy has come to be seen as more powerful and more multifaceted than was previously assumed. From the late 1970s “literacy” began to be employed as a generic rather than a specific referent. One of the earliest of such uses was “computer literacy”, proposed by John Nevison in 1976:

Because of the widespread use of elementary computing skill, there should be an appropriate term for this skill. It should suggest an acquaintance with the rudiments of computer programming, much as the term literacy connotes a familiarity with the fundamentals of reading and writing, and it should have a precise definition that all can agree on. (Nevison, 1976: 401)

A profusion of other literacies followed, and virtually any sphere of life now has its own literacy, or even set of literacies, although the use of the word ranges from simple competences, through knowing one's way around a field of study, to developing critical and evaluative responses to areas where things may be not what they seem. Thus "media literacy" is seen as not only using, or even understanding, but developing a critique of media products. Finally literacy studies has engaged with changes in society, associated with and sometimes brought about by development of new technologies, and recognised as "new literacies". But this has not been without difficulty: according to Taylor and Ward (1998: xvi), "Literacy theorists will need some time to reestablish their bearings and resituate notions of literacy given the sudden reality of a networked world and electronic texts."

A second source of insight is the influence of educational theory and practice. This will affect thinking about eLiteracy in two ways. First, much eLiteracy activity is about enabling individuals as learners, in the context of changing educational environments. Pedagogies and technologies have interacted to fuel developments such as that of virtual learning environments (VLEs), based on digital technology and constructivist pedagogy. Thus Moodle, a widely-used VLE, claims as its strength its basis on "a strong grounding in social constructionist pedagogy" (see <http://moodle.org>). eLiteracy provision must prepare students for this environment and providers must therefore understand it, and engage with it. Second, the way in which eLiteracy is delivered reflects decisions providers make about the adoption of particular models of learning. Much training still remains based on a simplistic individual-reward model and there is often insufficient thought given to the pedagogy of eLiteracy. This approach is encouraged by the proliferation of qualifications based upon low-level competency-lists, with little or no reflective or evaluative element. That some eLiteracy practitioners are proud to see themselves as "trainers" whose objective is to enable subject to successfully repeat required behaviour is challenged by questions of pedagogy.

A third source of insight is the reflection that we live in a real world whose social, political and cultural characteristics constantly offer challenge to what it is comfortable to assume. One of its disturbing features is the so-called "digital divide" which reminds us that the digital is always political. Nancy Kaplan has captured this well in her definition of "e-literacies",

first, to mean those reading and writing processes specific to electronic texts (by texts, I mean a whole range of digitally encoded materials -- words, sounds, pictures, video clips, simulations, etc.);

second, to signify elite-racies as in those socio-economic elites whose interests might be served by electronic literacies of one sort or another, or who might come

to be elites by virtue of their ability to shape electronic literacies. (Kaplan, 1995: 3)

We hope that the *Journal of eLiteracy (JeLit)* will enable practitioners, researchers and thinkers, and I'm not suggesting that these are three different sets of people, from any background, with any angle on eLiteracy will be able to share their insights, their experiences, their challenges, and their solutions on our pages. For aid in reference, we will paginate *JeLit*, but that does not mean that hypertextual contributions are not acceptable. We intend that material appearing in *JeLit* will be wide-ranging, inclusive, non-partisan, timely, courteous, and of high quality. We have no preconceived notion of what is a "correct" or "incorrect" approach to eLiteracy, and you will see pieces critical of the notion of eLiteracy itself in our pages. We have no preconceived notion of where the boundaries of eLiteracy are, but we believe that they are pretty wide, and much is relevant which might not on a *prime facie* glance seem so. An online journal does have an advantage in, as long as we do our bit quickly enough, reporting thoughts, actions and discoveries not too long after they happen. Courtesy might seem an odd item to include, but we believe that rudeness and personal hostility have no place in academic discussion. Finally, quality is essential, and to that end we will use a large body of editors and another large group of reviewers to referee and moderate the content of *JeLit*.

JeLit is also an open access journal, compliant with the Open Archiving Initiative standards. We believe that the ideas and discussions that take place through the journal should be available to anyone to read and participate in.

Contributions to *JeLit* are organised into a number of categories. *Papers* are discussions of topics relevant to eLiteracy themes involving a theoretical, comparative, overview or critical element. *Case studies* are considerations of experience or practice focused on one or a limited number of situations or cases. *Research reports* are reports of research work which is ongoing, of a small scale, or unlikely to lead to a theoretical or overview paper. Papers, case studies and research reports all need to have a theoretical context. All three of these types of submission are peer-reviewed by our editors and reviewers. Further categories, which are moderated by the editors, are reviews, Notes and Queries, and Announcements. *Reviews* can be of books, online publications, websites, learning materials, hardware and software, conferences and other events, or indeed any other item deemed worthy of review. *Notes & Queries* can include any short item of a miscellaneous nature, such as reports of actions or events, letters, calls for information, questions being raised, and responses to previously published items, or anything else which readers would find interesting and relevant. *Announcements* might be of forthcoming conferences, meetings, courses, imminent publications, calls for papers, or anything else that might be relevant.

We would invite all our readers to consider making a contribution to *JeLit*. The themes page on the *JeLit* website is intended to encourage contribute from as wide a range of perspectives as possible. Fields of study and endeavour do not remain static, and the themes of *JeLit* will evolve along with debate within the field. Volume 1 (2004) of *JeLit* will have two issues, the second one to be published in December 2004. From Volume 2 (2005) onwards, we will publish *JeLit* three times a year.

The content of this issue represents the variety, both thematically and geographically, of what we hope will be a continuing feature of *JeLit*. Alan Bundy offers a contribution to the terminology debate and argues that eliteracy should be contextualised within an information literacy framework; Catherine Cardwell and Dan Madigan discuss novel collaborative partnerships in the delivery of high-level transferable skills; Ginny Franklin and Ruth Stubbings present an analysis of projects designed to enhance and embed student information literacy skills within academic virtual learning environments; and Yordanka Volkanova, Anita Jackson and Mike Watts reflect on eliteracy within schools, with particular focus on the use of digital video editing as a tool for achieving self-reflection in children.

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