

eLit2004 Conference Reviews

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eLiteracy (*eLit*) refers to the whole range of skills and intellectual abilities needed to appropriately use the new technologies underpinning learning and life in the modern world. It includes computer literacy, information literacy, media literacy, thinking skills and learning skills.

The growing interest in eLiteracy is apparent at the annual *eLit* international conferences which bring together librarians, IT support providers, educators, researchers, policy makers and more. These conferences were founded by members of the 3 Glasgow universities: Glasgow University, Strathclyde University and Glasgow Caledonian University, and have been hosted in Glasgow for the past 2 years. The third conference of eLiteracy, *eLit2004*, was held at St John's University, New York on 2-4 June 2004 and attracted delegates from across the US and UK as well as countries as far afield as Bangladesh, Canada, Germany, New Zealand. The 2 main themes of this year's conference were Enabling Learners and Enabling Citizens.

The conference was opened with a welcome address by Dr Julia Upton, RSM of St John's University, followed by Allan Martin of University of Glasgow who set the conference theme with his paper "*eLiteracy – Enabling Students and Citizens*". The first keynote speaker, Prof Marjit Watts from University of Hawaii, gave a stimulating address "*Taking the Distance OUT of Education*". This questioned if we can really be in touch with our students to know what they bring and don't bring to their learning, if we teach them at a distance. She warned that we must be careful we are not losing our best teaching practices by teaching the masses through the use of technology. In contrast, the second keynote speaker, Robbie McClintock from University of Columbia gave a thought-provoking analogy of geographical communications involving the web of cities and transportation routes with the interactions of information and communications on the World Wide Web.

Throughout the three day conference there were five parallel sessions each with three streams. The range and quality of papers, case studies and workshops made the choice of session difficult. Many papers reflected on the student and staff experience at various institutions and broadened the definition of eLiteracy to include the areas of moral literacy, media literacy and even language literacy.

The closing plenary session came all too soon and brought together a panel comprising of Allan Martin, University of Glasgow; Sheila MacNeil, Learning and Teaching Scotland; Dan Madigan, Bowling Green State University; and Susan Beatty, University of Calgary. Each gave their reflections on the conference which included an element of satisfaction at the increasing acceptance and widespread use of the term eLiteracy. There was unanimous agreement that eLiteracy is something that is required from an early age and not just something that should be dealt with in higher education. We must therefore build an eLiteracy community of practice and share a common language.

At this session, some delegates expressed their disappointment at the lack of theory within papers as there is a need to develop the theory of eLiteracy as well as its practice. Since papers within parallel sessions were all limited to 20 minutes with 10 minutes for questions, this would involve restructuring the conference format. These thoughts are something for the organising committee to take back to Glasgow to consider in preparation for eLit 2005 at Strathclyde University, Glasgow! The conference ended with thanks to the local organisers at St John's University for hosting such an enjoyable event.

This was a smaller conference than the last two but equally as worthwhile. Its size made it easier to network, for the 'eLit regulars' to renew acquaintances and for all to make new acquaintances, communicate and share experiences.

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Speaking as a librarian, the eLit series of conferences have given me the opportunity to explore how the benefits of eLiteracy can enhance LIS work in quite special ways. These benefits stem from the fact that "e-literacy" is a synergistic concept – it is above all about uniting previously unconnected ideas that are more powerful together than apart. This is undeniably enriching, both conceptually as well as at the level of every day practice. By contrast, the literature of information literacy is rich, but in some ways its strengths derive from the constraint of its focus. At its heart is the idea of widening the context within which we educate the user to acquire library and information retrieval skills. This is in itself a synergy. Librarians have always wanted library users to be competent in information retrieval - the information literacy movement aspires to link such competence with mainstream learning achievements.

But e-literacy looks at a wider pool of competencies – the myriad skills of using a wide range of ICT tools that have never been considered in terms of their relationships, similarities and contrasts with the information retrieval tools of libraries. And just as information literacy has transformed our approach to the acquisition of the mechanical skills of library use, so can e-literacy enhance the way in which we train users to exploit e-tools. Helping users to master software in the context of that software's significant application to higher level learning tasks is the real goal of e-literacy, one which embraces and enlarges the aims of information literacy without denying its unique value to the library and information world.

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