

Literacy after lockdown – rethinking digital communication

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In March 2021 when schools in England reopened there was a palpable sense of relief. Children were back in school, they were back together. Because children thrive in each other's company, this was a particularly welcome return following the social separation of lockdown.

Formal education provides spaces for children to be together – not only in classrooms and other places designed for learning, but also at the school gate, in playgrounds, and in corridors. These spaces tend to be less regulated, but they are spaces in which childhood culture thrives, where children play and interact,

often under the watchful eye of adults, but not normally with their explicit direction. In this way primary schools have always provided so much more than the formal learning on offer. Unsurprisingly this feeling of being together is a large part of what children and their parents have missed. In lockdown they have been thrown back on their own resources, often heroically supported by teachers who have worked under extremely difficult circumstances to provide learning opportunities remotely.

There is only so much that can be done at a distance, but learning online has at least contributed to some continuity and connection between children and school. By all accounts this has been highly variable for a number of reasons. Availability and access to devices, appropriate working spaces, connectivity, and differing levels of confidence or competence have all played their part. After nearly 40 years of ICT



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in education one might have expected more. But technology has changed rapidly, what we own and what we can do with it is in a different league to the humble BBC microcomputers which found their way into primary classrooms in the 1980s. Lockdown has shown us that for all its potential, online learning has a long way to go, and that it is clearly no substitute for school and the vital role it plays in supporting children's social, psychological and physical well-being.

But before we completely dismiss technology we would do well to remember that children in their everyday lives encounter it at every turn. Like it or not they are born into a digital world. Family and social relations, help and advice, employment, civic participation and finance are increasingly mediated through technology and, just like their parents, the gaze of babies and young children, older and younger siblings repeatedly rests on screens. In this sense digital literacy is part of children's lives; they grow up with it and are often willing apprentices to new communicative practices (Merchant, 2020). In lockdown many (but not all) children were able to confidently access online resources, participate in class video calls and submit work in various formats. Some teachers reported being pleasantly surprised by what children could do – whereas others were completely

frustrated by the experience. But given the ubiquity of digital literacy, the role it plays in education at all levels, and the predicted shift towards remote working, we need to recognize what children already know and do with it, and work out how best to support them in school.

Children are not experts in new technology and they come into classrooms with very different experiences. Yet a growing body of research shows how we can build on what children know right from the earliest stages. For instance, recent work on iPads and other tablet devices shows how young children routinely incorporate them into their early meaning making (Harrison & McTavish 2018), how adults can support their use in early childhood settings (Neumann & Merchant, 2021), and some of the resulting professional dilemmas faced by teachers (Flewitt, et al., 2015). The most interesting work has shown children actively and confidently using digital literacy in everyday classroom settings with technology taking its place alongside other everyday things as they learn together (Wohlwend, 2019). As it turns out that is not very different from how most of us use technology – as a relatively ordinary but important part of how we come together, both in and out of formal settings. Learning now to use these new tools safely, intelligently and

critically is rapidly becoming an educational imperative.

A primary education that recognizes this imperative will need to place it alongside all the other things we have learnt through lockdown. Schooling that celebrates being together in its most expansive sense is vitally important, but this sort of schooling can also incorporate the creative use of technology. If we hold on to what we have learnt about what children can and cannot do online it will help, because all this matters in our current context as well as for the future - regardless of whether we face any further restrictions on social interaction.

In 2018 my colleague Cathy Burnett and I developed a framework for digital literacy that built on earlier collaborative work (see Burnett et al., 2014). In this we were keen to illustrate how digital literacy can sit comfortably in the context of everyday classroom life with all its liveliness and unpredictability, and how it can enrich and extend that sense of being together that is so valuable to primary education (Burnett & Merchant, 2018). In what follows I build on this by exploring six key challenges for literacy after lockdown, and these are challenges that focus on the growing influence of technology on how children and young people read, write and communicate.

1. How can we ensure equal access?

Research and anecdotal accounts that surfaced in the media during lockdown repeatedly underlined the fact that some children do not have access to reliable technology, may not have a stable internet connection

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at home, and cannot always find a suitable place to work (IFS, 2020). These are equity issues. If they align with other patterns of disadvantage then technology will just magnify inequality. But lack of access may also be a problem because other family members are working remotely. Connectivity may be compromised by heavy use, and working space may be limited when there are conflicting demands on it. Some of these factors are beyond the influence of educators, but schools can at least help children to get good access to technology and with this they can provide regular and meaningful experiences of reading and writing on digital devices.

2. How can we achieve balance?

Moral panic over the negative effect of too much screen time has resulted in an unfortunate over-simplification of what's really at stake here. The key issue of striking a balance between the more or less sedentary activity of working on screen and the need for other kinds of activity can get a little lost. In project work with colleagues we have reported on how children used tablet computers in innovative and creative ways in participatory theatre work, both in and outside the classroom (Burnett et al., 2020), how very young children play together and share interactive story apps (Merchant, 2015), and how virtual world play can be embedded in classroom life (Burnett & Merchant, 2014). It is important for children to use a variety of different forms of media for different purposes. No one should be arguing that typing a story is preferable to writing one by hand, or that a printed book is better than a story app, but they need to co-exist just as they do in the real world.



3. What do we offer online?

Because it is time consuming and expensive to produce online resources, remote learning has become a competitive environment for commercial developers. Commonly used resources like Reading Eggs and Numbots may have a role to play – perhaps they provide some motivation for rote learning - but they are not particularly effective in helping children to explore the rich possibilities of symbolic communication. Perhaps over-dependence on such resources accounts for why many parents reported on the challenges of motivation and engagement in children's remote learning (Ofsted, 2021). On the other hand, videos of teachers reading stories were often a highlight of the week in lockdown, as were the more interactive online lessons on offer. Some children responded well to submitting word processed documents and even if waving at each other on a video call was no substitute for the playground, it at least offered some experience

of what was happening in the adult world. Is there some way that we could develop online provision, perhaps in making homework more varied and more effective? And if we had to go into lockdown again what would we do differently?

4. What sorts of communication do we encourage?

Communication is not a choice, but how children express themselves could better reflect what goes on outside the classroom. Many children are familiar with exchanging messages in family WhatsApp groups, talking about the videos they watch on YouTube, making short movies on portable devices and much else, too. Important as handwriting and book reading may be, children experience communication in all its breadth and they bring these experiences with them into the classroom (Merchant, 2020). Our role as educators is to help and develop the communication



repertoire of the children we teach. Schools that tap into children's everyday experiences are in a better position to enrich communication and to foster intelligent and critical engagement than those that do not.

5. How do we foster critical awareness?

Worries about safety online, fake news, and digital surveillance, are unlikely to disappear overnight. Teachers and children need to face these issues together. Creating opportunities for children to think about what they share online, where they share it, and who with is a useful starting point (Burnett & Merchant, 2018). And although children can be astute in distinguishing between what is true and what is misleading, they do need practice, working together to critically evaluate sources of information - after all this is the bedrock of critical reading and knowledgeable writing. Digital surveillance, and particularly the ways in which platforms track and trade data about users, is a harder practice to critique because these activities tend to be hidden from users - but they can still be important topics for discussion.

6. How can we promote a sense of playfulness?

The success of Club Penguin Island, Minecraft, and all those sports simulations on games consoles

are testimony to the popularity of new forms of digital collaboration in the lives of children and young people. Sometimes referred to as digital play, Marsh et al., (2016) show how children move fluidly between digital and non-digital spaces as they engage in playful meaning making. The same sense of enjoyment, experimentation and improvisation can be harnessed in school contexts. An education stripped back to the formal learning of curricular requirements can be uninspiring and impoverished when compared to the rich social, psychological and emotional experience of going to school. Drawing on children's enthusiasm for digital literacy can contribute to this sense of being together, playing together and learning together.

Looking at primary schools with a renewed sense of appreciation can help us to recognize the vibrancy of childhood culture. This is a culture that does not distinguish between digital and non-digital worlds, but it is also one in which digital literacy is part and parcel of everyday life. Of all the things we learnt in lockdown, the possibilities that technology offers and the importance of being together can and should be brought together in re-invigorating primary education.

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