

Zen and the Arts of Digital Literacies

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(Received March 2014; final version received September 2014)

The main skill is to keep from getting lost. Since the roads are used only by local people who know them by sight nobody complains if the junctions aren't posted. And often they aren't. When they are it's usually a small sign hiding unobtrusively in the weeds and that's all. County-road-sign makers seldom tell you twice. If you miss that sign in the weeds that's your problem, not theirs.
(Pirsig, 1974, p.16)

The arena of digital literacy is a confusing, contested place. There are multiple definitions of the term; (supposed) 'authorities' on the subject express diametrically opposing views; and there exist almost as many frameworks for developing digital literacy as there are researchers in the field. The purpose of what follows is to try and clear a way through some of the weeds inherent in the 'field'.

The first problem when trying to understand digital literacy is the sheer pace of technological change. This is not a new phenomenon: there have been those complaining about feeling overwhelmed by developments since at least the Luddites at the dawn of the Industrial Revolution over 250 years ago. Having said that, it does appear that we live at a time when it is increasingly difficult to reflect adequately on our use of digital technologies. The reason for this is, perhaps, the release cycle of new products forcing us into a never-ending, uncritical, 'presentism':

Society is being transformed by the passage from the 'solid' to the 'liquid' phases of modernity, in which all social forms melt faster than new ones can be cast. They are not given enough time to solidify and cannot serve as the frame of reference for human actions and long-term life-strategies because their allegedly short life expectation undermines efforts to develop a strategy that would require the consistent fulfillment of a 'life-project'.
(Bauman, 2005, p.303)

If this is true, then the rapid pace of change could mean that 'digital literacy' becomes, in the eyes of some people, a synonym for mere 'functional skills'. What becomes important is the ability to 'keep up with new technologies' by being able to know which buttons to push when. Instead of critically reflecting upon our use of technology we're happy to merely 'get things done'. The more procedural elements of using technology are foregrounded with the *consequences* of our choices backgrounded. Operating at this surface level can be monotonous:

We're in such a hurry most of the time we never get much chance to talk. The result is a kind of endless day-to-day shallowness, a monotony that leaves a person wondering years later where all the time went and sorry that it's all gone. Now that we do have some time, and know it, I would like to use the time to talk in some depth about things that seem important.

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(Pirsig, 1974, p.17)

One extremely important concept to pay attention to in the realm of digital literacy is how to conceive of the term itself. There are many references in the literature to a singular, unitary form of ‘digital literacy’ as if there was something objectively ‘out there’. As Hannon (2000:31) points out, for those who subscribe to this view “the actual uses which particular readers and writers have for [a] competence is something which can be separated from the competence itself.” This seems problematic.

Instead, more progressive thinkers believe that we should “recognise... many specific literacies, each comprising an identifiable set of socially constructed practices” based upon print and organised around beliefs about how the skills of reading and writing may or, perhaps, should be used” (Lankshear, 1987, quoted in Hannon, 2000, p.32). This is the ‘pluralist’ view of digital literacies. Pluralists believe not only that we should speak of ‘literacies’ rather than ‘literacy’, but reject the notion that literacy practices are *neutral* with regard to power, social identity and political ideology. By intentionally or unintentionally privileging certain literacy practices hegemonic power is either increased or decreased (Gee, 1996).

Unfortunately, talk of hegemonic power, social identity and political ideology is not something you hear much of from those evangelising new technologies:

One thing about pioneers that you don’t hear mentioned is that they are invariably, by their nature, mess-makers. They go forging ahead, seeing only their noble, distant goal, and never notice any of the crud and debris they leave behind them. Someone else gets to clean that up and it’s not a very glamorous or interesting job.

(Pirsig, 1974, p.259)

While we need such technological pioneers, we also need people to ‘clean up’ after them. We need people to critically analyse both the intended *and* the unintended impacts of the technology they evangelise. While it may have been possible to outsource this critical reflection to ‘experts’ in the past, the speed of technological change means that we *all* need to be experts. We all need to develop our digital literacies to fully function in today’s society.

The problem with this is that technologies can, broadly speaking, perform two functions. They can, to be sure, streamline, improve and speed up existing processes. But technologies can also bring about new habits, new behaviours, and new workflows. Unless these habits, behaviours and workflows are analysed along with the technologies upon which they depend, then we (as a society) are sleepwalking into potential problems:

There is a knife moving here. A very deadly one; an intellectual scalpel so swift and so sharp that you sometimes don’t see it moving. You get the illusion that all those parts are just there and are being named as they exist. But they can be named quite differently and organized quite differently depending on how the knife moves.

(Pirsig, 1974, p.81)

Technology can provide us with such certainty. It promises to make us more productive, more creative, and even more ‘cool’. The world we inhabit, however, is fundamentally *ambiguous*. Some of this ambiguity is unavoidable as we cannot, for example, know each others’ thoughts. We are limited to imprecise forms of communication (such as speech) where, depending on context, ‘wombat’ can refer both to a marsupial or a term of insult. On the other hand, some ambiguity can be intentional. While this may often be looked upon as a bad thing, it can, in fact be positive. As William Empson (1930) set out in *Seven Kinds of Ambiguity* there are many forms of such ambiguity. And, in the words of Richard Rorty, those terms that lose all vestige of ambiguity become “dead metaphors”, carapaces, forming a kind of coral reef, a “foil for new metaphors” (Rorty, 1989, p.118).

Digital literacies are inherently contextual. To name but two of a myriad of factors, digital literacies depend upon the *situation* in which the technology is being used, and the *skills* of those using the technologies. Attempting to impose a supposedly ‘objective’ definition of a singular ‘digital literacy’ is therefore likely to prove problematic. Unless we *co-construct* definitions of plural ‘digital literacies’ then we are likely to run into some of the problems we discussed above, particularly around power and identity. Take, for example, the number ‘zero’ as a metaphor for digital literacies:

Zero, originally a Hindu number, was introduced to the West by the Arabs during the Middle Ages and was unknown to the Ancient Greeks and Romans. How was that?... Had nature so subtly hidden zero that all the Greeks and all the Romans – millions of them – couldn’t find it? One would normally think that zero is right out there in the open for everyone to see.
(Pirsig, 1974, p.237)

We can have what Professor Cathy Davidson calls ‘attention blindness’ when we are dealing with things in the realm that we *think* we know. Co-creating definitions of digital literacies can empower those who would not ordinarily have a voice within an institution, organisation or group to have their skills and behaviours validated. What is also important about such co-construction is allowing alternate views of the world. As alluded to above, ‘digital literacies’ are not objectively *out there* in a tangible form:

Some things you miss because they’re so tiny you overlook them. But some things you don’t see because they’re so **huge**. We were both looking at the same thing, seeing the same thing, talking about the same thing, thinking about the same thing, except he was looking, seeing, talking and thinking, from a completely different **dimension**.
(Pirsig, 1974, p.62-3)

Digital literacies are what could be termed a ‘convenient hypocrisy’. They are concepts that we use fully knowing how problematic and divisive they can be. Our justification for using such terminology is that we hope that drawing attention to the skills, practices and behaviours they represent is *socially useful*.

Procedural, functional, skills are important when it comes to technology. However, if this is all we have then we are missing something. They are the mere vestibule to the rich hall of digital literacies. We need a method for including conceptual skills whilst not denigrating the functional, the utilitarian. To be ‘digitally literate’ it is important to display both. We need ways in which to quickly agree on the skills, practices and behaviours that are useful in both the procedural and conceptual domains:

What has become an urgent necessity is a way of looking at the world that does violence to neither of these two kinds of understanding and unites them into one. Such an understanding will not reject sand-sorting or contemplation of unsorted sand for its own sake. Such an understanding will instead seek to direct attention to the endless landscape from which the sand is taken.
(Pirsig, 1974, p.86)

One way to view the (digital) world in a way that “does violence to neither these two kinds of understanding” is to avoid objective definitions of a singular digital literacy. In my doctoral thesis (Belshaw, 2012) after an extensive literature review and meta-analysis I came up with eight ‘essential’ elements of digital literacies. These were elements that were present in most of the important literature in the field of digital literacies:

1. Cultural
2. Cognitive
3. Constructive
4. Communicative
5. Confident

6. Creative
7. Critical
8. Civic

The eight elements form a framework to allow for the co-construction of a definition of digital literacies that suits the particular context – be it an organisation, institution or group. Those involved can, for example, even decide for themselves what constitutes the ‘Civic’ element of digital literacies in their context. Once they have done this they can proceed to ‘weight’ the elements to decide which they believe to be the most important or relevant. Finally, this should lead them to be able to define ‘digital literacies’.

It is easy to see the history of technology as the history of increased atomisation of society, as leading humans to be increasingly individualistic:

Technology is blamed for a lot of... loneliness, since the loneliness is certainly associated with the newer technological devices – TV, jets, freeways and so on... [T]he real evil isn't the objects of technology but the tendency of technology to isolate people into lonely attitudes of objectivity. It's the objectivity, the dualistic way of looking at things underlying technology, that produces the evil.
(Pirsig, 1974, p.361-2)

What we need to remember is that technology is designed by *people*. It is created by an individual or group of people for a particular purpose. We, too, need to decide what our response is going to be to that technology. This could be to reject the technology completely, or it could be to design new workflows and behaviours because of it. The important thing is to have a clear response based on a co-constructed definition. I hope that that the ‘eight essential elements’ framework enables this to happen.

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