Production and Consumption

A Closer Look at Adult Digital Literacy Acquisition

GLORIA E. JACOBS, JILL CASTEK, ANDREW PIZZOLATO, STEPHEN REDER, & KIMBERLY PENDELL

This is the last column of the "Multiliteracies: Consumption and Production" department. In the past two years, I have considered the relationship of multiliteracies to the challenges faced by practitioners and researchers in today's world. It is clear there are no easy answers to the variety of challenges facing educators, but hopefully continued conversations will serve to move us forward as we work to serve learners in diverse contexts.

The tendency of literacy and technology research is to focus on children and adolescents; however, multiliteracies among adult learners are also important to our work. In this last column, members of the Literacy, Language, and Technology Research Group (LLTR) from Portland State University discuss why an understanding of adult digital literacy learning is important within a multiliterate world. I joined LLTR in October 2013 to work on the *Tutor-Facilitated Digital Literacy Acquisition in Hard-to-Serve Populations* project, led by Stephen Reder and Jill Castek. This column introduces the context of the work being done by LLTR within this project (see http://www.pdx.edu/linguistics/literacy-language-technology-research-group-lltr) and focuses on the relationship of adult digital literacy acquisition to multiliteracies. The column also provides a contextualization of the tutor-facilitated digital literacy project within the larger framework of adult literacy acquisition.

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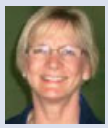

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Adult Digital Literacy Acquisition Can Provide New Insights into Multiliteracies

The examination of adults' digital literacy acquisition offers a new way of thinking about multiliteracies, the use of digital tools for making meaning and accessing the world, and the nature of digital literacy. The focus of this column during the past two years has been on adolescents and what digital tools and multiliteracies mean for youths, especially within the contexts of compulsory education. Throughout the course of this department, I have argued that a pedagogy of multiliteracies (New London Group, 1996, 2000) offers a powerful way for youths to develop the skills, experiences, and achievements (what Gee (2000) called a portfolio) necessary for success in an information-based society. What this perspective has neglected, however, are the voices of adults who have—through any number of circumstances—been left out or left behind by the technological changes presented by the emergence of the Internet and other information and communication technologies.

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The concept of the digital divide has been problematized as involving more than access to hardware; for instance, Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma, Robinson, and Weigel (2006) identified a participation gap that involves ways of using and interacting with digital tools, and Lankshear and Knobel (2007) argued that engagement with Web 2.0 involves a new ethos or way of understanding one's relationship to knowledge construction. Furthermore, Prensky's (2001) dichotomy of digital natives and digital immigrants has been found to be overly simplistic and in need of more nuanced understandings of what it means to be able to use the computer and Internet. As Lankshear and Knobel (2007) suggested, the idea of the digital insider and digital newcomer may, in fact, be more useful.

Researching Adult Digital Literacy Acquisition

For the past three years, LLTR has embarked on an ambitious research project focused on better understanding the tutor-facilitated digital literacy learning processes among economically vulnerable, under-served, and high-need adult populations (i.e., low-income, low-literate, elderly, and English Speakers of Other Languages) who are new to, or have limited experience with, technology. Learner Web has been used by this population as a self-access, web-based platform that houses online content in the form of digital literacy learning plans focused on Computer and Internet Skills, Broadband Consumer Education, and an Introduction to Career Pathways. The learning plans are designed for use in computer labs operated by an array of institutions (e.g., public libraries, K-12 schools, community colleges, four-year colleges, public housing agencies, workforce centers, community adult education and literacy programs, and other community-based organizations) and are localized and customizable as organizations implement the tool based around learners' goals.

Learner Web was designed to give learners a self-directed learning experience that is coordinated and supported in person by volunteer tutors. Tutors are trained to help learners set goals and provide the guidance needed to achieve success. Learners access the Learner Web through individual accounts that connect them to personalized learning plans designed to meet their learning self-identified goals. Learning plans organize, scaffold, and sequence resources (both online resources and local community-based support) and instruction. They are step-by-step pathways that learners follow to reach specific goals (e.g., Learn to use the mouse, How to use e-mail, Staying safe online).

The system also allows for tutors, lab coordinators, and others to login to the system for training and to monitor learners' work in order to provide feedback. The Learner Web system tracks progress toward learners' goals while also generating an extensive amount of user data that can be disaggregated and analyzed by multiple factors such as income, race/ethnicity, location, and other characteristics. For more information about Learner Web, go to http://learnerweb.org.

In this project, the Learner Web captured extensive system data of more than 12,000 learners' online activities during the course of three years. Data have been collected from 130 computer labs in six geographically diverse locations (see the interactive Google Map at https://mapsengine.google.com/map/edit?mid=zUDVbh3MzLDs.kLEJ3jKZMFTc). In addition to the system data, the project team has collected more than 100 interviews with learners, tutors, service providers, and other key stakeholders, as well as video recordings of lab activities and tutoring activities. Data collection has been completed and data analysis is underway using a mixed methods approach. Since preliminary findings are still emerging, this column presents emerging insights based on a holistic overview of the data.

Interviews of adult digital literacy learners hold promise for providing insight into the experiences of the digital newcomer and the shifts that occur as they gain knowledge of the digital world. For example, although Jenkins et al. (2006) and the pedagogy of multiliteracies (NLG, 1996, 2000) stressed the importance of becoming content producers or designers, when it comes to vulnerable populations accessing the skills to become an informed digital consumer is an important entry point into the digital world. Based on our experiences with these learners, we have come to better understand how the shifts learners undergo as they gain experience and confidence with digital tools can help educators develop more robust systems for supporting vulnerable populations who are outside of the traditional educational system.

Why Is It Important for Adults to Acquire Digital Literacy?

The tremendous growth of new technological environments is considered a driving force that transforms our world into a global, universal society. Proficiency in

the use of information and communication technologies affects our lives and everyday relationships and is involved in every aspect of our lives. This knowledge makes it possible to access instantaneously a range of information, interact with public services, communicate with friends, engage in political activities, gain employment, and participate in ongoing education.

All adults, no matter their experience and backgrounds, must bridge the digital divide and acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed for personal, social, and economic success in the wired world of the 21st century. Expanding adult digital literacy is essential for confronting vulnerable adults' issues of exclusion and marginalization that are increasingly being amplified by the digital mediation of modern social life.

Why Is It Important to Study Adults' Digital Literacy Acquisition?

Often when 21st century digital literacy acquisition among adults is discussed, the topic revolves around providing displaced and underemployed members of the workforce the skills they need to pursue better paying jobs. While this is indeed a critical mission, and one that is reflected in the strong partnerships between workforce centers in most of our project sites, equally important is providing adults the opportunity to learn digital skills that empower them to connect with social networks in technology rich environments. These skills can have transformative effects on lives of learners, something reported repeatedly in our field interviews. In addition, when adult learners have a positive experience acquiring new skills with the face-to-face support of patient tutors, they acquire the strategies and confidence necessary to explore the digital landscape and engage with new challenges.

In rural Minnesota, an 80-year-old project participant described the effect of learning to use computers and the Internet like this:

> Tremendous. Tremendous. It's like opening a door. Imagine living in an apartment with no windows, and then somebody comes and puts windows in. It's about that different. You know? Cause when your world is just around you, and this has become much more important since my husband's health, even if I'm at home, I can look out. I don't like to be enclosed, I like to look out. I enjoy sociability, and it gives me sociability.

For this largely home-bound senior citizen, acquiring the skills to stay connected with family, friends, and the wider world was life-altering. And imagine what it must mean for her family to connect in their familiar and comfortable digital spaces. It is important to recognize, as our social spaces shift into the digital world, that all members of our communities need to be able to take part in online activities. Community duties and roles may not always translate directly to the online world, but all individuals must have a voice in exploring and redefining these roles—adolescents and seniors and everyone in between.

What Do Adult Learners Say About Acquiring Digital Literacy?

As part of our interviews with adult digital literacy learners, we asked individuals to reflect on how their emerging use of technology has changed their lives.

> A Spanish-speaking woman in her 60s: When you learn something that you thought was impossible, and when you learn that, of course it changes your life because when it gives you confidence you can reach anything. Without confidence you don't go not even to the corner.

> An African American unemployed woman: It's made [everything] more convenient.

> A man in his 40s recently released from prison: It's changed my life by learning more stuff, learning new things, getting more knowledge. It's real important for me because I live out in the sticks; it's like my communication with the rest of the world. Otherwise I'd probably be feeling pretty isolated out here.

> A Spanish-speaking mother in her 20s: Now with the Internet it's so much easier to do things. If someone is sick I can go on there [the Internet] and look. You can learn more, and you are more current with everything.

These adults' experiences and reflections demonstrate that instantaneous access to information, coupled with convenient access to supportive peers and networks, can lead to increased personal empowerment, civic participation, and lifelong learning.

What Does this Research Mean in the Larger Context of Adult Literacy Acquisition?

We have shared just a few of the insights that have emerged as we began to analyze data from the digital literacy acquisition project focused on vulnerable adults. It is already clear that project findings

will contribute not only to the base of research and theory in the emerging field of digital literacy acquisition but also to the field of adult literacy more generally. We have already commented on the relationship between this work and the well-established framework of multiliteracies and multimodal literacy practices. This project will expand the reach of that framework through analyses of how new-to-Internet adults acquire those digitally mediated competencies through variously configured blends of online and face-to-face teaching and learning supports.

Note

The authors are members of the Literacy, Language, and Technology Research Group, Department of Applied Linguistics, Portland State University, Portland, Oregon.

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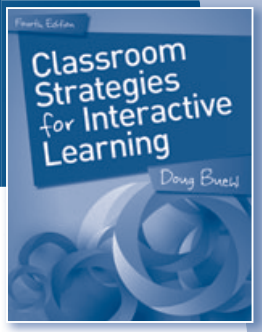

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