

# The Digital Literacy Classroom

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# Introduction

At the beginning of this minibook it is worth asking the question, what is primary literacy? Furthermore, why is English so important within the primary National Curriculum? The answer at first might be obvious - in fact the National Curriculum clearly gives an answer that many would concur with:

*English is a vital way of communicating in school, in public life and internationally.* (DfEE, 1999, p.14).

Communication, spoken or written, is central to everyday life and, through the primary classroom, these skills are developed. Another view of the importance of primary literacy arises from an appreciation and value of literature:

*Literature in English is rich and influential, reflecting the experience of people from many countries and times.* (DfEE, 1999, p.14)

So for children 'growing up in a digital world' (Plowman et al. 2010, p146), what skills, experiences and attitudes will they need to have developed in order to communicate 'in school, in public life and internationally' (DfEE, 1999, p.14)? Moreover, if literacy should reflect 'the experience of people from many countries and times' (DfEE, 1999, p.14), how are schools embracing the range of multimodal and digital literature that currently permeates society?

The purpose of this book is to encourage busy professionals to challenge aspects of their current practice and consider how they can adapt this, where appropriate, to incorporate and value the digital technologies that their children might already be accessing elsewhere. It aims to provide a platform for opening the scope of digital literacy in the classroom. Digital

literacies permeate society and are ‘ubiquitous’ in people’s lives (Carrington and Robinson, 2009). Many young people already construct texts online through an abundance of websites; social networking, sharing photos, composing Blogs and so on. For those that are not actively engaged in becoming digital authors online, they may ‘read’ texts through television or film narrative and experience ‘new literacies’ (Lankshear and Knobel, 2006) that have emerged through a range of devices including video games. Yet education in the UK has far from fully adapted to the wide range of digital literacy practices that could be employed (Marsh, 2007). It is hoped that the suggestions provided in this minibook will support teachers in using their Virtual Learning Environments for instigating literacy activities that could later initiate further work with digital literacies. The book is aimed at those wanting to explore ideas for using Virtual Learning Environments or other online technologies further in their literacy lessons as a starting point for shifting their own or their school’s mindset towards the cultural uses of literacy that have emerged.

## **Prior knowledge**

The activities described in this minibook use a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) within literacy lessons. VLEs look and feel similar to a website but they primarily aim to facilitate learning. There are a number of VLEs available for schools, such as Moodle and Blackboard that allow teachers to control and edit its content. They contain various tools and applications that can be used for educational purposes, such as assessment tools, questionnaires and quizzes, the facility to upload files and applications for writing online. The benefit of a VLE is that it can track users in a variety of ways. For example, teachers can view reports showing which children have accessed the VLE and what applications they have completed. Assessment tools can also analyse a child’s performance. Children can also access the site from home if they know the VLE weblink. This book inspires ideas for using different tools within a VLE but is not a guide for the technical aspects of VLEs. As these tools can be accessed through different learning platforms and online websites, it is not possible to provide a practical guide for the management of these sites. Facilitators of the suggested activities would require some basic knowledge of the interface related to their specific VLE. If this is required, it is

recommended that practitioners access the help pages and online guides associated with their school's preferred learning platform. Teachers may need to seek ICT technical expertise to establish:

- How to manage children's usernames and passwords
- How to assign children, parents, teachers to different areas within the VLE
- How to upload material to the VLE
- How to select and set up different 'activities' within their VLE.

Children will also need to have some basic understanding of how to navigate their schools' VLEs and rules for safeguarding the children online will need to be established. For support with acceptable use policies and internet safety, a useful place to start is

**Safe Network** (<http://www.safenetwork.org.uk/>) for teachers and **ThinkUKnow** (<http://www.thinkuknow.co.uk>) for children.

If users are unable to acquire the functional skills associated with their VLE, then it is worth noting that there are alternative websites available for carrying out many of the activities described here. These alternative websites are often available for free and can be more aesthetically pleasing than VLEs with user-friendly interfaces. However, these sites usually require further sign-ups on behalf of the children. The benefit of using a school's VLE is that it should be a secure site available only to stakeholders within one particular school. Therefore, fears of internet safety or abuse can be alleviated and it is possible for a school to track users' activities. The activity suggestions in this minibook make use of tools available through Moodle as this is the most common VLE provider found in schools. This book begins by exploring what digital literacy is and then discusses how a VLE can be used for teaching fiction, in chapter 2, and non-fiction, in chapter 3. Chapter 4 investigates the possibilities of using a VLE for engaging readers and developing online reading communities. The final chapter looks to the future of digital literacy in primary schools. Throughout the chapters, readers are invited to try some activities and suggestions with their classes.