Rethinking Digital Literacy for Teachers in Open and Participatory Societies

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that models for the integration of ICT in teacher training should be based on a holistic understanding of digital literacy that considers the ongoing change in knowledge production, management and consumptions connected with the generalised rise of open and participatory societies. In order to understand how this could be done, the article analyses a few digital literacy frameworks, including the recent DigCompEdu framework by the European Commission, looking for the space given to competencies related to openness and collaboration, and proposes some reflections on how critical competences could be included in contemporary digital literacy frameworks for teachers. The article concludes that more should be done by teacher training initiatives to transform educators into critically literate actors able to participate competently in digital practices but also to transform these practices into an active, inclusive and open way.

KEYWORDS

Collaboration, Critical Literacies, Digital Literacy, Open Education, Teachers Training, Teachers’ Competences Frameworks

INTRODUCTION

The Importance of Teachers Training in Digital, Open and Participatory Societies

We are increasingly immersed in an open and participatory culture (Jenkins et al., 2006), this being true for both offline and online practices, which are increasingly interrelated (Wright et al., 2014), even if it is in the online world where the highest potential for open and participatory dynamics exists (Boyd, 2014). Informal and peer-to-peer learning, innovative attitudes toward intellectual property, differentiation and mixing of cultural expressions and a more proactive conception of citizenship are among the potential benefits of these emerging open and participatory dynamics. Still, to fully enjoy these benefits, three main challenges need to be overcome. First, unequal participation. Even if the percentage of online population steadily increases, access is distributed unequally among citizens - globally, as well as within countries, regions, communities (Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development, 2017) and among those who participate, just a few are really able to influence online debates, while the vast majority just follows. Second, low media literacy. This is grounded on the difficulty to clearly understand the ways in which media shape our perceptions of the world and on the urgency to separate fact from fake news. Last but not least, ethical issues. Citizens should possess the capacity to reflect about the ethical choices they make in online settings and about the impact that
their behaviour can have on themselves as well as on others (Alexander, Adams Becker, Cummins, & Hall Giesinger, 2017).

To address these challenges, it is compulsory to rethink the competencies that must be at the core of contemporary learning experiences, from pre-school to continuing education. For this to happen, teachers must be empowered with an appropriate set of technical and sociocultural competencies tailored to the new open and participatory settings they are teaching – and living - in.

The present paper wants to contribute to critically identifying which competencies are needed for contemporary teachers and to understanding whether existing digital literacy frameworks are fitted to equip teachers with those competencies needed to both educate learners and to act as living examples of citizens of open and participatory societies. Starting with a brief analysis of the concept of digital literacy, we have analysed two important digital competencies frameworks and a rather new teachers digital competencies framework, looking for the way they consider and accommodate open and collaborative competences. Based on this analysis, we sketched and discussed a few competences that should be urgently included in any capacity building effort aiming at building teachers’ digital literacy.

BACKGROUND

Evolving Digital Literacies

Digital literacy means different things to different people, along a continuum that goes from instrumental skills in the use of ICTs, to productive and creative competence and efficiency, to social and participatory attitudes (Alexander, Adams Becker, & Cummins, 2016). Further, digital literacy is transversal to all domains of activity of a contemporary citizen, who should ultimately be able to make a “confident, critical and creative use of ICT to achieve goals related to work, employability, learning, leisure, inclusion and/or participation in society” (Ala-Mutka, 2012, p. 1). Multiple and overlapping understandings and uses of the terms skills, competences and literacies exist, in particular in reference to digital literacy (Calvani et al., 2008; Belshaw, 2014; Brown et al., 2016) and to concepts such as information literacy, 21st Century literacy and Media Literacy, which are all connected to the idea of being able to meaningfully act in a digital society, still tackling the problem from different angles (Ferrari, 2012).

What is undeniable, as noted among others by Ferrari (2012), is a move from a technical towards a more composite understanding of what it should mean to be digitally literate today. An effort in this direction has been made by the European Policy Network on Literacy (ELINET) which has been advocating for a holistic view of digital literacy that goes beyond the capacity to use ICT devices, in line with the approach adopted by Jisc in the UK: “Digital literacy looks beyond functional IT skills to describe a richer set of digital behaviours, practices and identities” (Jisc, 2014) and by Calvani et al., who already in 2008 defined digital literacy as the “complex integration between cognitive processes and dimensions as well as methodological and ethical awareness (Calvani et al., 2008: 186).

Specifically, ELINET noted that, even if policy and practice are clearly moving from the original concept of digital competence, intended merely as the capacity of use ICT, towards a more holistic idea of digital literacy that encompasses digital citizenship and media literacy, still, the two concepts are sometimes used interchangeably (Lemos & Nascimbeni, 2016).

In order to reach a shared understanding of digital literacy able to respond to the need of empowering citizens for open and participatory societies, a first question to be tackled is the relation between literacy – in the classic meaning – and digital literacy. Along with Chase and Laufenberg, we believe that “digital literacy is not a new literacy. This is to say, if digital literacy is simply reading and writing in a digital environment, there is no need for the new terminology. (…) Let us then accept digital literacy as a genre, a format and tool to be found within the domain of standard literacy, rather than a concept standing at odds” (Chase & Laufenberg, 2011: 535). An important differentiation
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