

Digital Literacy: High-Level Expert Group Recommendations

A. Context

B. Motivation and Awareness Raising

C. Teaching and Learning

D. Content, Services and Usability

E. Critical Skills

F. Evaluation, Research and Benchmarking

G. Funding and institutional setting

The Digital Literacy High-Level Expert Group put forward the following Recommendations:

A. Context

Digital media and tools, facilities and usages are profoundly interconnected to national and local economic, social and cultural structures. Digital literacy is thus a key element of citizenship, social inclusion and public services policies.

Unless digital literacy actions are grounded in the social, cultural and economic realities of the locality, delivery of basic digital literacy skills cannot be translated into success at the level of relevant and effective usage and innovation, which can make an impact on the root causes of exclusion or marginalisation.

An example might be targeting an ethnic or cultural minority population in community-based public Internet access points, where training in digital skills runs alongside and is articulated with other training (e.g. local language and cultural issues), allowing digital usage to be practised in meaningful contexts which encourage integration into society.

Social and economic exclusion is a multifaceted problem that requires accurate analysis and diversity and flexibility in terms of proposed solutions. In developing and delivering digital literacy initiatives, government agencies, business, and civil society must adapt to context and join with organisations that are close to the target groups and can articulate their requirements and aspirations. Furthermore, they must enable initiatives that are meaningful and relevant in social, cultural and economic terms. The role of 'social gatekeepers' and intermediaries, individuals who can identify the needs of the excluded and make digital initiatives socially relevant, should be recognised.

The increased dependence on online public and commercial services and consequent scaling down or phasing out of traditional

offline services can at the same time be a benefit for some and a disadvantage for others. There is a risk that new forms of exclusion and newly excluded groups may emerge. These risks need to be identified and addressed as a key element in digital literacy policy. This development may also present opportunities to create incentives for the take-up of digital literacy actions.

Recommendations

- **Embed digital literacy initiatives within local socio-economic contexts, adapting them to the specific needs and context of the targeted population;**
- **Use existing local social structures, organisations and people to develop and deliver digital literacy actions and to make them sustainable;**
- **Encourage synergies with other public policy initiatives, in particular those concerned with online public, e-Government and commercial services;**
- **Pay attention so that new marginalised groups are not created as an unintended consequence of 'scaling down' traditional/off-line services.**

B. Motivation and Awareness Raising

It is vitally important that new media are meaningfully connected to people's individual and social needs and purposes and to their everyday lives. In the last two decades, member states and stakeholders have placed emphasis on providing access to digital technologies and the Internet as well as bridging the digital literacy gap. Although the question of access remains relevant, it is now increasingly important to consider motivation as a key driver to engage individuals in the use of technology and to keep their digital literacy skills up-to-date.

Awareness raising campaigns, particularly for groups at risk of exclusion such as older persons, migrants, minority groups and any other group in society that is at risk of marginalisation, should aim to increase motivation by demonstrating and making evident the benefits of using digital technologies in their personal and professional lives; and by demonstrating the value of new media for learning, cultural development, access to services, entertainment, communication, creative expression, etc.

However, enthusiasm in using digital technologies also raises issues of risk and safe usage; and awareness-raising should therefore complement positive attitudes with sensitivity to safe and sensible usage.

Recommendations

- **Raise awareness of the positive potential and value of new media;**
- **Raise awareness of the benefits of using digital technologies in people's personal and professional lives;**
- **Raise awareness about the various risks associated with using digital technologies and promote safe use guidelines.**

C. Teaching and Learning

Learning and teaching approaches can have a major impact on the success of digital literacy initiatives and should be carefully considered, and be relevant to the context and nature of each initiative.

Research shows informal learning to be an important means of acquiring digital skills. Providing opportunities for increased informal learning within digital literacy initiatives should therefore increase their effectiveness (for instance, developing networks and communities of common interest, which can become loci of informal

learning to acquire and upgrade digital literacy).

Another important element in accessing and motivating excluded or marginalized groups is the role played by 'intermediary deliverers', mostly volunteers but some paid workers, who work directly with and alongside the target groups as a bridge between 'technology' and 'society'. Intermediaries need to be specifically trained to work with disadvantaged groups, but should also be seen as a source of knowledge regarding the target group and the content and methods of approach that would be efficient, recognised and valued and that would also be an important source of evaluation feedback.

Encouraging individuals to share internet connectivity, develop software and online content, or establish virtual communities, can enable informal learning as well as practical and community-related activity. Home networks may stimulate learning (including intergenerational), while collaborative environments can support self-learning and informal peer-learning. Developing online content is a particularly productive learning activity, encouraging motivation and participation, promoting informal learning, and enabling situating of learning within relevant social and cultural topics. In this context it will be important to build and sustain networks of tutors.

Formal educational structures should not be ignored, as these run alongside and articulate with informal structures. Formal structures may be directly used in an initiative, or there can be valuable exchange of information and experience. Awareness of digital literacy initiatives and their value should be incorporated in teacher education programmes. Other formal structures such as public libraries, museums, cultural or community centres should also be considered as valuable resources.

Recommendations

- Teaching and learning strategy should be a key element of proposed programmes, and should be relevant to the context and nature of the activity and the groups involved;
- Make full use of informal as well as formal learning within digital literacy programmes;
- Make full use of intermediaries in motivating target groups and delivering initiatives;
- Make full use of e-learning and online platforms in delivering initiatives, balanced appropriately with face-to-face/offline engagement;
- Enable target groups and individuals to generate content, create online communities and improve participation;
- Interact with relevant formal educational and related structures.

D. Content, Services and usability

Once connected to the digital world, each individual user must be empowered to source and interact with content, services and websites of choice. As the digital world becomes more diverse and wireless enabled, users will be connected through different devices and platforms. Productive, inclusive engagement is crucially dependent on content and services that are suitable for purpose and that can be readily accessed by the target user group and where usability is a core design value. It is important that the capabilities and prior experience of users are taken into account, and also the particular difficulties particular groups may have in using content and services. Varying degrees of difficulty should be

addressed, including the needs of those requiring assistive technology.

Recommendations

- Support the development of content and services for users, paying particular attention to those who are marginalised or under-represented, and monitor effectiveness in terms of uptake;
- Support multi-platform modes of access and participation;
- Improve information and visual design standards for content and services to take account of expected capabilities and prior experience of the target user group;
- Pay particular regard to the inclusion of persons requiring assistive technologies.

E. Critical Skills

In recent years, much emphasis has been placed on widening access to the Internet and on identifying and addressing gaps, whether brought about by a lack of physical access to an Internet point of connection, lack of motivation to use the Internet or by a deficiency in basic skills and confidence required to use the Internet. While continuing to monitor and address gaps until they have been eliminated, it is now a priority to turn attention to the question of participation and to focus on the extent and quality of the user's engagement with content and services. The agenda is moving from: 'who is connected' to 'what are they doing' and 'for what purpose'.

The key concepts of media literacy - representation, language, production and audience - provide a comprehensive framework that can easily be applied to

digital media. For example, in relation to the internet, this approach raises questions about representation - about bias, authority and ideology - that are typically neglected in accounts of information technology. It calls for a systematic analysis of the language (the grammar or rhetoric) of new media - for example, in relation to links, visual design, mode of address, and so on. It includes an analysis of production, of the commercial and institutional interests at stake, of how web texts are produced, and of how they relate to other media. And it looks at how this impacts on the audience or the user, how users are targeted and invited to participate, and what they actually do, what they find meaningful and pleasurable. Such an approach takes us beyond questions about whether or not the information on the web is true, or whether it can be trusted. Much work has already been done at the European level on media literacy, e.g., the European Commission Media Literacy Framework and the Euro Media Literacy Charter (see www.euromedialiteracy.eu).

Such an approach implies the promotion of critical and creative thinking in users, a focus on quality of usage, and a consequently broader and more critical approach to the measurement and evaluation of digital literacy achievements.

Recommendations

- Broaden the understanding of 'digital literacy' and align it with an existing framework for 'media literacy';
- Focus on the development of users' critical thinking, cultural and creative skills;
- Develop strategies to promote appropriateness and quality of use;

- Broaden the measurements and evaluation of digital literacy beyond operational skills to awareness, critical thinking and problem solving.

F. Evaluation, Research and Benchmarking

Connectedness in the digital world is increasingly becoming integrated with other forms of social and societal interaction. Questions of digital and media literacy and e-inclusion can no longer be artificially separated from wider questions of social inclusion or engaged citizenship. As 'quality of use' becomes a dominant theme, it will be necessary to develop appropriate criteria, evaluation methodologies and benchmarks that can be used effectively to target resources to areas of need and to measure impact and value for money.

Recommendations

- Develop and use appropriate evaluation and impact assessment frameworks including more socio-economic background variables and more indicators related to motivation, critical thinking and quality of use;
- Support research leading to the development of more sophisticated evaluation and benchmarking tools for digital and media literacy programmes;
- Support critical academic research.

G. Funding and institutional setting

The intrinsic complexity of the digital divide requires the mobilisation of civic society and industry in order to effectively deal with the problem. However, policy does not always

accommodate the involvement of the private sector in a broader eInclusion strategy. Then again, evidence in the Review indicates that the initiatives depend mainly on public funding, which begs the question on how to attract private funding for digital literacy projects.

Recommendations

- Configure institutional settings and devise digital literacy strategies that will encourage synergies and

partnerships amongst public authorities, civic society, media and industry;

- Engage the private sector by adopting win-win strategies which will ensure sustainability and longevity of digital literacy initiatives;

- Adopt flexible funding intervention approaches that focus on continuous and sustainable community e-learning growth, supported by the development of local leadership and capacity.