



The United Kingdom Literacy Association
Registered Charity 313714

Response to the Byron Review

The United Kingdom Literacy Association (UKLA) is a national subject association whose sole objective is to further literacy education. It is an educational charity with an impressive record of collaborative research and development with the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), the Primary National Strategy (PNS) and the British Film Institute (bfi). In the last few years UKLA has given evidence to several government enquiries and consultations with DCSF. In addition, members of its Executive Committee, National Council and Special Interest Groups are acknowledged experts in the field of literacy education generally and many have published widely on digital technologies. The evidence offered here is based on research carried out by members of the UKLA Digital Literacies Special Interest Group, funded research by QCA which resulted in the report *Reading on Screen* and research carried out by individual members of the National Council in their own institutions.

Since UKLA is an educational charity, the evidence offered will largely be related to children and young people. We have responded only to questions for which we have research evidence from studies conducted by UKLA members. References are included at the end of the responses.

Section One VIDEO GAMING

- 1. Video Gaming – what are the benefits of video games to a) children and young people b) society and c) the economy?**

There is ample evidence from elsewhere (Gee, 2003 ; Mackey, 2004; Marsh, 2004) that computer games can make a significant contribution to children's cognitive development. Research carried out by UKLA members supports this and provides additional evidence of increased ability to read for inference from experience of playing video games (Bearne et al, 2007). Equally, there is evidence of improvements in speaking and listening and writing after classroom activities involving video games (Bearne and Wolstencroft, 2005). All the research evidence from UKLA sources indicates increases in motivation and engagement. One recent research project (Wolstencroft, 2007) (conducted with 240 children aged between 5 and 11) points to the benefits of video and on-line games both cognitively and socially:

The intellectual stimulus of overcoming challenges and problems to find creative solutions featured highly in the interviews, children's own designs and discussions about video games. The majority of the children in the study chose to include a range of game-oriented challenges such as time trials, rescues, collection of objects, overcoming a range of opponents. For a small number of the older children the opportunity to interact with a wider online community was valuable and gave a sense of self esteem based on shared understanding and skill.

In addition, there is evidence of the social advantages of video games when children or young people play games in their own homes. Often the play is accompanied by others – friends or members of the family – and the resulting collaboration replicates teamwork in other situations. There is also, as indicated in the quotation above, a social advantage in becoming part of an on-line community.

The number of children and young people (both boys and girls) who report enjoying playing video games suggests that their expertise in problem-solving; finding creative solutions; experience of collaboration; and competing with themselves and others offers a strong potential future advantage in terms of life skills and flexible thinking to society and the economy.

2. What are the opportunities presented by video games to a) children and young people b) society and c) the economy?

Children's knowledge of computer game structures of different kinds supports their understanding of text structures. This offers opportunities in terms of learning to compose texts for specific readers and purposes. If children are able to access and write the kinds of increasingly complex texts required by the 21st century economy, this is an important aspect of children's knowledge that is currently not used in the curriculum. Similarly, the experience of inference and deduction prompted and fostered by video gaming offers opportunities for the development of reading – both on-screen and off. The experience and knowledge of young people drawn from their video gaming suggests that gaming offers potentially valuable experiences for future learning and development.

Again, although UKLA does not have direct evidence, these opportunities are equally valuable for society and the economy. The majority of the 1,852 parents of 0-6 year-olds surveyed in the *Digital Beginnings* research (Marsh et al, 2005) were generally very positive regarding children's media use, felt their children learned a great deal from it and felt that schools should do more in using digital technologies in schools.

The following section covers questions 3,4,5,7

3. What are the potential and actual risks to children and young people who engage with video games and how should the Review approach defining and measuring the risks?

4. What do a) children and young people and b) parents know already about the potential and actual risks of playing video games?

5. What do a) children and b) parents think and feel about the potential and actual risks of playing video games?

7. To what extent do a) children and young people and b) parents understand and use the video games age classification system and/or other descriptions of content?

There is often a sense that video games promote violence. Although there seems little substantive evidence for this (Sorensen & Jessen, 2000; Raessens & Goldstein, 2005), concerns remain and these have formed part of some of the research which is the source of this response. Children and young people in several of the studies were very aware of the classification systems for video games, but responses from 1,852 parents of the youngest children (up to 6 years old) (Marsh et al, 2005) suggests that while 17% of their children played console games on a 'typical' day, some were age inappropriate but the parents had little experience in judging the appropriateness of video games in relation to their experience of judging other media e.g. films.

Older children from the ages of 9 –11 have increasing access to games classified for older audiences but these are often played with the knowledge of parents or played with older family members. In one of the key studies about gaming (Wolstencroft, 2007) comments:

A small number of 9-11 year-olds said that their parents were not interested in the games or the classifications, however these children were able to discuss the violent content of some of these games rationally and saw them as acceptable only within the fantasy context of the video game. The children were very conscious of adult reactions to violent content. A small number of the children played and designed games based on the events of World War 2. The games were part of a wider interest in the history of the time and seen as a way of understanding the experiences of the soldiers. However, the games mentioned by the children did not represent purely violent content. The main aspect of the games was collection and response to challenge. A small number of the boys in the study played strategy games based on ancient battles. In discussion with the children, the interest in the games was the intellectual challenge of deciding strategy and compared by one child as being similar to chess. A repeated theme of the games of the older children was the element of choice, particularly the ability to choose the development of a character and plot for 'good' or 'evil' with the responsibility resting on the shoulders of the player. There was no evidence in the study of game content impacting on the children's social and emotional skills with a detrimental effect.

UKLA would suggest that the Review approach defining and measuring risk through further research with children and young people which seeks to discover their views. Much 'evidence' so far about possible harm is drawn from adult views and whilst these are of course important, it seems sensible to have a balanced picture which also draws on the genuine experience of those young people who are video gamers themselves.

12. What, if anything, could be changed in order to help children, young people and parents manage the potential or actual risks of playing a) hard copy video games b) games downloaded from the internet c) games played on line, and what are the pros and cons of different approaches?

13. What are the emerging opportunities for developing other ways of supporting children, young people and parents?

As an educational organisation, UKLA would recommend that alongside regulation, education in critical literacy of all media, including digital media, should be a priority for educational policy makers. It would be appropriate if in discussions of media education, DCMS and DCSF were both included.

Section Two: THE INTERNET

This section includes responses to questions 14, 15, 16, 17, 18 and 20.

14. What are the benefits of the internet to a) children and young people, b) society, c) the economy?

15. What are the opportunities presented by the internet for a) children and young people, b) society, c) the economy?

**16. What are the potential and actual risks to children and young people who use the internet and how should the Review approach defining and measuring those risks?
17. What do a) children and young people and b) parents already know about the potential and actual risks of using the internet?**

18. What do a) children and young people and b) parents think and feel about the potential and actual risks of using the internet? 20. Are children, young people and parents aware of the tools available and to what extent do they use them?

20. Are children, young people and parents aware of the tools available and to what extent do they use them?

UKLA's Digital Literacies Special Interest Group (SIG) and the research project *Reading on Screen* found ample evidence of the learning and developmental benefits for children and young people from using internet sources both for learning and for leisure/entertainment.

This extract from Marsh (in press) details some of the key advantages to learning and social development:

Virtual worlds have become increasingly popular with primary-aged children over the last two years and sites that are frequently mentioned by children and parents include *Club Penguin*, *Webkinz*, *Neopets* and *Barbie Girls*. The worlds differ in terms of their affordances, but sites such as *Club Penguin* and *Barbie Girls* enable children to create and dress-up an avatar, decorate their avatar's home, buy and look after pets and play games in order to earn money to purchase items for their avatars and homes. Both of these virtual worlds also enable interactive chat that is tightly controlled and monitored in order to allay parental concerns regarding Internet safety. This seems to be a successful strategy, as there are numerous sites across the web in which parents state that they feel comfortable with the safety measures in place, as this typical post attests:

i let my kids useclub penguin and i think it is perfectly safe
i read through all the parents bit and privacy and safety and it is completely safe
it also teaches your kids the rules of chatting online and i would reccomend it to every one else

Posted by: sophie at February 20, 2007 01:22 PM¹

This parents' desire for her children to learn the practices associated with social networking is one shared by many others. In a recent report, the National School Boards Association (NSBA, 2007) in the USA surveyed 1,039 parents and stated that the majority of parents held positive views regarding the educational potential of social networking sites. Similarly, in the 'Digital Beginnings' study in the UK, parental attitudes demonstrated positive attitudes towards the role of new technologies in their children's lives (Marsh et al., 2005).

Although these virtual worlds are ostensibly aimed at 8-14 year-olds, inevitably there are reports of five- and six-year-olds using them. These sites offer children opportunities for engaging in online social networking with others and this has been the main focus for those adults concerned about such

¹ Posted on 'Business Week' blog at:
http://www.businessweek.com/careers/workingparents/blog/archives/2006/09/while_moms_a_way.html

practices, who worry that it may lead to a decline in literacy practices. However, a survey of the sites indicates that literacy is deeply embedded into the virtual worlds, as children have opportunities to write online messages, read others' messages, read catalogues, magazines, newspapers and instructions. The literacy skills, knowledge and understanding these virtual worlds can foster include:

- reading skills and strategies including: word recognition (e.g. the vocabulary choices offered in 'safe chat' mode, in which children can chat to others using a set of already defined words and phrases; instructions; in-world environmental text), comprehension, scanning text in order to retrieve appropriate information, familiarity with how different texts are structured and organised, understanding of authors' viewpoint, purposes and overall effect of the text on the reader;
- writing skills and strategies including: spelling, punctuation, syntax, writing using and adapting a range of forms appropriate for purpose and audience, using language for particular effect;
- writing for known and unknown audiences;
- using text to negotiate, collaborate and evaluate.

In addition, children develop skills across the visual, gestural and aural modes as they juxtapose words with image, move avatars across the screen and listen to in-world oral texts.

(Marsh, in press)

Both for children and young people, the web allows a broad range of interactions and relationships to develop on-line. Virtual world environments have been used in schools to the benefit of cognitive, social and emotional development of primary aged children (Merchant, 2007). Wikis are sites of collaborative reading and writing, providing the genuine audiences and purposes for literacy aimed at by the National Curriculum, but often engaging young people more intensely than school-based literacy, challenging many of the assumptions on which contemporary literacy education has been based (Carrington in Carrington & Robinson, 2008 forthcoming). However, the ability to change, update, edit and debate information on these sites requires a rethinking of information and expertise. Members of the Digital Literacies SIG emphasise that the development of critical literacy is essential to support children and young people as empowered and safe users of social internet sites (Carrington & Robinson, 2008 forthcoming).

Marsh, (in press) reports on a project in which a teacher enabled primary aged children to create blogs related to a variety of topics. Creating and using the blogs enabled the children to put into practice the school's Internet Safety Policy and learn about safe navigation of the internet in a meaningful way. Allowing children to use social networking software in this way can facilitate the development of critical literacy skills in an online environment rather than using punitive strategies (such as the blanket fire-walling of social software sites) which are often counter-productive. Similarly, Davies (2005) demonstrates the wide range of skills, knowledge and understanding that these online practices generate – skills and knowledge which will become increasingly important for both employment and leisure in an information economy.

There is a need, however, to ensure that curriculum, pedagogy and assessment in schools is adapted in appropriate ways in order to ensure that children are offered appropriate educational experiences. The *Reading on Screen* research, which surveyed some 200 children and young people from 3 – 16 found that the youngest

children were adept at using internet sources. However, in terms of the opportunities offered by the internet, and its potential to support children's learning and development in the future the research showed that the forms of assessment of ability detailed in the QCA Assessment Focuses cannot adequately describe the potential for use of screen-based texts (Bearne et al, 2007):

The skills and strategies which children bring to their understanding of screen texts suggest the value of reviewing descriptions of reading development. It also indicates the importance of developing appropriate teaching approaches. It would also be useful to review the use of the reading assessment focuses to describe the reading demands of screen and paper-based reading in the 21st century (Bearne et al, 2007: 28).

Further evidence from the *Reading on Screen* research indicates the importance of the curriculum – and approaches to pedagogy – to take full account of the opportunities offered by online resources as evidenced by these extracts from the report summary:

- Evidence from children as young as 5 shows sophisticated expertise in on-screen reading, even where homes may not have computers. Friends, other family homes, internet cafes and school clubs provide opportunities for children to access on-screen texts. DVDs and videos also contribute to awareness of screen conventions.
- Data from screen readers' experience across a wide span of ages indicate some features of the developmental process of becoming a discriminating screen reader. Pupils gave strong opinions about the value, interest and relevance of their chosen on-screen texts, giving good reasons for their views and recommendations.
- Observations showed sustained engagement with reading on screen including persistence in following internet sources, reading the same screen text over a period of time and returning to texts and sites over several weeks. Pupils followed their own reading pathways driven by motivation and engagement directed by their own interests. They also indicated the deployment of self-regulated reading practices.

(Bearne et al. 2007: 27)

In terms of pedagogy, although the *Reading on Screen* research found some very good practice in classroom approaches to using internet sources, there is a pressing need for both continuing professional development and initial teacher training to include methods of teaching critical appraisal of internet sources, particularly at secondary school level. There was also evidence that pupils are not being sufficiently challenged to use their home-based screen experience in the classroom. The research indicates:

- In the older age-range there was some evidence of teachers making assumptions that students know how to access, interpret and critically analyse internet texts and therefore not teaching the more sophisticated research skills of internet searching and elements of teaching critical reading.
- Teaching critical reading is necessary for internet (and other) on-screen texts. There was some evidence, particularly with older students, of teachers assuming that they do not need to teach skills of finding, interpreting and critically analysing internet texts.
- Most of the projects saw examples of good practice in the increasing use of screens in classrooms offering increased opportunities for reading as a

collaborative activity both as shared reading with whole classes and guided activities in pairs or groups.

(Bearne et al. 2007: 28)

In addition, as national assessment procedures impact on both the curriculum and pedagogy, on-screen reading in all forms should be included in assessments. As the *Reading on Screen* report summarises:

The expertise that children show in finding, trawling, navigating, scanning and reading screen-based texts can be transferred to classroom reading of all kinds of texts. But there are questions about how much children's reading is extended and challenged in classrooms in relation to their experience and expertise. Online reading involves new texts which offer new challenges for teaching, for example, interactive texts and documentary video texts which appear on interactive websites. Not only is the content more fluid, and even perhaps ephemeral, but the structure of such texts involves different reading choices from those of paper-based texts. Teaching critical reading is necessary for internet (and other) on-screen texts.

This relates to another implication for the curriculum – and indeed for assessment – the matter of what development in becoming a discriminating and effective reader might mean as screen reading becomes a more significant feature of the reading diet. The skills and strategies which children bring to their understanding of screen texts suggest the value of reviewing descriptions of reading development.

(Bearne et al. 2007: 29)

In summary, based on research evidence from its own members, UKLA would recommend that following this consultation process, more attention is paid to curriculum, pedagogy and, importantly, assessment procedures in respect of using internet sites in the classroom. It is not enough to develop regulatory procedures. These need to be accompanied by a pedagogy which deliberately includes critical reading and appraisal of internet sources. Many children and young people have a great deal of knowledge and experience of video games and internet use. This is a source of cultural capital not only for their individual futures but for the future of the economy and society as a whole. If schools do not harness and build on this knowledge and expertise, then not only will this capital be squandered, but children and young people will not be able to make discriminating use of the screen-based sources they meet every day.

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