

DIGITAL LITERACY

The new emerging literacy for schools



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THE EMERGENCE OF A NEW LITERACY FOR SCHOOLS

The concept of digital literacy and achieving a baseline standard of digital literacy for a given cohort is becoming increasingly necessary within the business sector and the wider community - and schools are not immune.

With the migration to online and remote learning from the early months of 2020, teachers and school administrators, at all levels and across a range of disciplines, have been pushed to integrate technology into the way they work and teach at an expedited rate, regardless of individual digital competencies.

This almost revolutionary change in the way schools have been operating has shown us many things. One of them is, while we indeed haven't shunned technology in our classrooms or the most basic administrative processes of our schools, it is increasingly apparent that developing a school workforce that's confident and resourceful in using digital technology is a major professional development challenge that needs to be addressed. And that applies to both teaching and non-teaching staff.

Online teaching standards have improved considerably but technology does not stand still; future technological advances will continue to challenge teachers and school staff.

The focus of this eBook is to help you understand digital literacy, why it should be an essential professional development tool for your teaching and non-teaching staff, and how you can start improving digital literacy across your institution (with some examples thrown in for good measure). So first...

It cannot be overstated how important it is for school leaders to ensure digital literacy plays a part in the professional development of their institutions, both now and ongoing.

WHAT IS DIGITAL LITERACY?

Digital literacy is a broad term with many facets that need to be taken into account when attempting to understand precisely what it is.

As a handy starting point, [Associate Professor Jo Coldwell-Neilson from Deakin University](#) explains digital literacy as “the ability to identify and use technology confidently, creatively and critically to meet the demands and challenges of living, learning and working in a digital society.”

In other words, digital literacy is the capacity of people to adapt to an ever-expanding range of new technologies and use them effectively in both their personal lives and their day-to-day work roles.

HR consultancy [Jaluch HR](#) sees the merging of tech skills and digital skills as an important element of digital literacy. As they suggest, tech skills relate to how good someone is with setting up equipment like Wi-Fi systems and networks, printers, audio-visual technology, software installation and programming skills. Digital skills, on the other hand, refer to a person's ability to get the most out of devices like computers, laptops, tablet and smartphones.



Proficiency with programs and software like Word, Excel, mail and social media platforms, web-browsing and integrating applications like digital calendars, online meeting hosting, document publishing and graphic design platforms is included in the definition of digital skills.

In a school environment, digital literacy is about the ability of your staff to use technology to do their jobs more efficiently. For teachers, digital literacy skills can help them incorporate technology within their lessons and engage with their students in a way that provides a more engaging, real-world educational experience.

Likewise, for both teaching and non-teaching staff, digital literacy has a role to play in providing people with the skills to make the administrative side of their roles less time-consuming, improve professionalism and provide exceptional customer service to external stakeholders.

WHY SHOULD DIGITAL LITERACY BE PRIORITISED?

In a school environment, digital literacy is about the ability of your staff to use technology to do their jobs more efficiently.

There are so many reasons why digital literacy should become a priority for all staff within a school.

For students, digital literacy standards include their ability to engage with multimedia and interpret the text, sounds and images they come across in the real world. It's also about their proficiency for evaluating the honesty, accuracy and integrity of what they see, read and hear online (think: fake news) and then developing their understanding in appropriate ways to meet their educational and personal needs.

To help guide students through this journey, it stands to reason that teachers need to have a similar comfort level and proficiency with digital technology. In a lot of instances, today's students are far more proficient with technology than their teachers.

The benefits of being digitally literate extend to non-teaching staff in schools.

The era of big data and an increased reliance on analytics is upon us. More and more, we see decisions made within schools based on empirical evidence, which means, the more information you have at your disposal, the more effective you will be when it comes to future planning, resource management and understanding what matters within your school community.

Technology is an easy and cost-effective way to power responsible data collection, enabling leadership and staff to make informed choices and decisions on a range of critical issues. Having a digitally literate workforce with the necessary skills to access, analyse and present these insights accurately will facilitate the kind of collegiality this decision-making needs.

Digital literacy is essential for staff to do their roles as professionally and efficiently as possible, and it will only become more so.

CONTINUED... WHY SHOULD DIGITAL LITERACY BE PRIORITISED?

Perhaps most importantly, digital literacy can play a more significant role in improving overall productivity and efficiency.

Beyond using the most basic functionality any given technology offers, the ability of staff and teachers within your school to unlock the productivity benefits of an EdTech platform (like EdSmart) can be achieved quicker and much less painfully with a digitally literate workforce.

By harnessing these productivity and efficiency gains, your teachers and staff are allowed to spend more time on the core functions of their jobs and make sure your school delivers a unique educational experience to the members of its community.

Digital literacy can play a more significant role in improving overall productivity and efficiency.



BRISBANE CATHOLIC EDUCATION: A CASE IN POINT

Brisbane Catholic Education (BCE) is responsible for delivering services, programs, and resources to more than 77,000 students annually in the Brisbane Archdiocese.

In 2020, with the impacts of the Coronavirus forcing schools around the world into online learning, BCE managed to effectively roll out three years of technical skills and know-how to their 12,000 staff members in just three months.

The implementation of its remote learning package – Alternative Education Program (AEP) – led to a dramatic across-the-board increase in the digital literacy levels at BCE schools.

"We have 146 schools and eight offices, and they are already connected to a range of enterprise-wide systems," explained Sharyn Creed, Manager of IT and Learning Services. "They were used for marking rolls online, collaborating and reporting in those online spaces."

"Similarly, our parents were used to receiving and accessing information via our parent portals and on mobile apps, so they knew of those environments but they probably weren't as practised in using them."

Understanding the likelihood of post-Easter classes in 2020 being non-existent, Sharyn, along with BCE's Manager of School Information Systems, Allan Sheffield, and their AEP technical teams (known as Digital Support Program Leads), launched into action to facilitate remote learning for teachers and students. What resulted was an exciting collaboration between IT and teaching.

"We put together a virtual conference and allowed teachers from across the organisation to choose their session," said Allan. "Some were about how to run an online meeting in Teams, how to distribute content when the students have iPads at home or how to record online meetings and where to share them – really practical stuff – as well as about the best practises around pedagogy and curriculum."

"We advertised the forums and the response to that was huge," Allan continued. "We had hundreds, even thousands, of teachers over the course of three days join us."

CONTINUED... BRISBANE CATHOLIC EDUCATION: A CASE IN POINT

Surveys and interviews that Allan and Sharyn have since undertaken have shown how this fast-tracked digital literacy journey led to significant benefits across their schools, staff and students. Brisbane Catholic Education found:

- Noticeable growth in learning independence and resilience for both students and staff;
- Authentic collaboration among staff across year levels and subject areas;
- Increased risk-taking — "People were failing and growing together all at the same time in those environments," Sharyn noted. "And there was a degree of comfort in that";
- The precision of pedagogy — "Students were individually working in their homes and teachers saw the need to differentiate the experience for them," Sharyn explained. "COVID didn't enable that, but it definitely prompted a need to differentiate the learning to meet different student needs";

- Development of 'the student voice' — "The schools found students were more curious; they were asking deeper questions," added Allan;
- The strengthening of partnerships between teachers and parents/carers — "Parent engagement is one of those things that schools don't want to give up," Allan emphasised. "The students want those collaborations to continue. They want their parents to be involved in their learning and to understand what's happening in the classroom."

As Sharyn concluded, "We really want to explore how we can take this forward and enable true transformation; that concept of using technology to facilitate individual and adaptive learning environments, and supporting teachers in providing differentiated support for different students."

[See the full BCE presentation here.](#)



THE IMPORTANCE OF A LEVEL DIGITAL PLAYING-FIELD

Creating a level digital playing-field not only ensures everyone working at your school can use technology to its fullest potential, it also gives your staff personal and professional confidence.

In many circumstances, staff who might not be as skilled in using technology can often feel intimidated by colleagues who make using a tablet device to deliver a lesson look simple. It's not unusual for people behind the digital literacy curve to feel overwhelmed when coming to grips with the gaps they need to address in the tech world – that's human nature – but they shouldn't be left to struggle alone.

Improving the digital literacy of your staff is a great way to unite multi-generational workforces. It not only ensures every employee meets a basic standard of technical know-how and operational skills but it also helps foster a sense of inclusivity.

As a professional development tool, improving digital literacy has a huge positive influence on staff wellbeing, morale and retention rates. We have mentioned [the importance of professional development in other articles](#) but it's something that should always be at the forefront of school leaders' minds.

IMPROVING THE DIGITAL LITERACY OF YOUR PEOPLE



No matter what the workplace, levels of digital literacy differ from employee to employee.

Although sometimes there can be an overlap, digital literacy levels are likely to be higher in businesses or industries with a large concentration of younger employees in emerging sectors such as multimedia, digital marketing, programming or data analysis. Organisations with older employees in more traditional roles – manufacturing, service industries, construction, logistics and schools – may have lower digital literacy rates.

The good news is that improving the digital literacy of both teaching and non-teaching staff is not hard to do. While every organisation is unique, there are some basic principles you can use as a framework for improving the digital literacy of your employees, no matter what your industry sector.

Bridging the gap between younger and older employees is crucial.

CONTINUED... IMPROVING THE DIGITAL LITERACY OF YOUR PEOPLE

Given digital literacy is a broad field, you must have the right balance between developing proficiency on specific devices, software or platforms and making sure your staff are well-versed in areas like cybersecurity and digital/online ethics. In many ways, scaling up the digital literacy of your teachers and administrative staff should be approached in much the same way as you would any other change management process or how you would teach.

Your importance on digital numeracy should correlate with general literacy and numeracy skills in your school. After all, is digital literacy any different?

Here are some tactics to consider:

- Communication is an integral part of any change process, and promoting digital literacy within the workplace is no different. Making sure that teachers and administrative staff have some insight into how the type of skills associated with digital literacy will benefit them at (and away from) the workplace — the 'what's in it for me' — is powerful.
- Be open and honest about the actual reasons why your school is pursuing improved digital literacy and highlight how it will benefit your staff in a broad context. No matter the mix of age and experience in your school, never assume that people won't benefit from participating in digital literacy improvement sessions.
- Understand the digital literacy areas of value to your school and have a starting point for prioritising skills. Understanding your school's needs will, in turn, help you identify what skill-sets your employees need to have in their toolkit.

WHAT DOES A DIGITALLY LITERATE SCHOOL LOOK LIKE?

To gain an insight into what a digitally literate school looks like, [we spoke to a global digital innovator in education, Philippa Wraithmell.](#)

When we interviewed her, Philippa was wrapping up her role as Director of Digital Learning at the award-winning Cranleigh School in Abu Dhabi. When she commenced her role in 2019, Philippa was given the epic task of developing the school's digital learning strategy. When she completed her role, she had transformed Cranleigh into a one-to-one device school, which equates to one device (computer, laptop or tablet) per student.

Digital literacy has been embedded into the curriculum at Cranleigh, with every subject capable of delivering content relevant to the real world on both Google and Apple systems. The school has a capital expenditure budget every five years to allow for the required technology upgrades.

"Digital literacy, if it's delivered correctly, should be able to allow a student, by the time they're in Year 7, 8, 9, to be making their personal choices about what platform they want to use," Philippa explained. "Allowing a student to use a device that is multidisciplinary is going to enable them to be a lot more confident in using digital technology across their lives because their transferable skills will just become so much more competent."



CONTINUED... WHAT DOES A DIGITALLY LITERATE SCHOOL LOOK LIKE?

Continual assessment is a feature of a digitally literate school: "There's so much continual assessment going on that data drops aren't needed anymore. That's because of the use and the workflows, which staff have now been able to develop over the [journey]."

Constant re-assessment of the technology they use is also a priority. As Philippa says, "It's about the next steps. Where do we go from here? We need to build in that knowledge of teaching and education and say, 'Okay, pedagogically, that is improving learning, and that is what we need to do and we need to do more of it'. And so it's finding those things. It's reviewing everything that people have done now regarding their school and their school's ecosystem. What worked for us? What helped our children to learn in a better way? What eased workload? What was helpful to our staff? What made things less stressful?"

"What we need to teach children is those tangible skills," she continues. "They're not going to go into an office and be told to use an app to write an email, so why teach them to use an app to write an email? Why not teach them to use email?"

"Whatever your ecosystem is – whether that's Microsoft, Google, Samsung tablets, whatever it happens to be – teach them how to use the device and the software that's on it because they will retain those skills. Apps don't do that. Apps are so likely to disappear off the face of the earth by the time a student gets to the end of school, so teaching them how to use an app is irrelevant."

"Teaching your students how to use software is a relevant skill. If you can build things like that, then your digital literacy becomes stronger."

HOW THE EDSMART ACADEMY CAN ASSIST YOUR SCHOOL'S DIGITAL LITERACY

Feeling intimidated or overwhelmed is a primary reason people can sometimes shy away from embracing new technology and platforms.

To build confidence and, ultimately, give staff more time to focus on what they want to do best, we've established the EdSmart Academy.

In this space, users, regardless of their tech skill levels, can be guided through the EdSmart platform functionality.

"The more familiar principals, admin staff and teachers are with EdSmart and understanding the potential it has and what they can do with it, the more they're going to get out of it," said Kai Vedanayagam, Customer Success Manager at EdSmart.

"And this is not just with EdSmart but across-the-board with other digital platforms schools may use."

Schools have limited time on their hands," concluded Kai. "They're always so busy doing multiple things. If you understand how to use the EdSmart software effectively, you should get tasks done faster. And that's why I think digital literacy is crucial."

To enrol in the EdSmart Academy and take self-paced tuition in the fundamentals of EdSmart, visit the [EdSmart Academy](#).

IN CONCLUSION

The relationship between education and digital technology is strengthening at a rapid pace. For teachers, digital literacy skills can help them incorporate technology in their lessons and engage students with a relevant and dynamic real-world educational experience that properly equips them for life beyond the school gates.

However, digital literacy is also a pathway to improving productivity and efficiency in a school itself. By harnessing these productivity and efficiency gains, your teachers and administrative staff can spend more time on the core functions of their jobs, making sure your school delivers a unique educational experience to the members of its community, improving professionalism and providing exceptional customer service.

As a professional development tool, developing digital literacy has positive impacts on staff wellbeing, morale and retention rates, and it is a great way to unite multi-generational workforces.

The benefits of embracing a solid digital literacy approach in your school cannot be overstated. It will be vital for school leaders to ensure that digital literacy plays a part in the professional development of their teams today and in the future.

To learn more, visit  EdSmart

