

3rd World Conference on

ARTS, HUMANITIES, SOCIAL SCIENCES, AND EDUCATION

October 16-17, 2023 | Paris, France



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The advent of digital literacy in 21st century higher education: What is it and its place in student development?

In 1997, Paul Gilster coined the idea of 'digital literacy' to describe the term "literacy for the digital age" (Gilster, 1997, p. 1). It pertains to the ability to understand and use information in multiple formats, from different sources, and presented through computational means. However, the term digital literacy did not gain widespread consideration for at least another decade, often misunderstood and used differently. Indeed, the term digital literacy has largely defied a concrete definition, despite the apparent currency of this term in 21st century higher education. Against this backdrop, the research investigated 42 universities to unpack the meanings of digital literacy as ascribed by each university examined. The aim is to establish how such meanings influence the contemporary enactment of student development and to locate the meanings of the term digital literacy. The study showed variations in defining this term and noted that universities have diverse educational goals as espoused in their corresponding definitions of digital literacy, from developing technical skills of using and understanding technology, to possessing a set of capabilities for living, learning and working in an increasingly digital world. For universities who identified a coherent account of digital literacy, the results indicate that their practices of promoting the development of digital literacy are entrenched in their espoused intent for graduate outcomes. The paper concludes with curricular and pedagogical implications in preparing and assisting students for the challenges of living, learning and working in a digital society.

Reference: Gilster, P. (1997) Digital Literacy, John Wiley & Sons, New York.

Biography:

Dr. Nona Press is a Senior Lecturer within the Education Portfolio at Queensland University of Technology. She is a Senior Fellow of Higher Education Academy, UK. Her professional practice, research and scholarship have focused on curriculum, pedagogies and assessment that engage students in learning and, in turn, enhance the quality of educational experience. She pursues a research agenda and a broad research interest in the preparation of students for professional practice, leveraging on curriculum transformations, pedagogical and assessment innovations, and building upon digital and technological affordances in health disciplines such as nursing, public health, paramedicine, psychology, social work and counselling among others.