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# RaPAL

Digital Literacies



# Journal

# The Research and Practice in Adult Literacies Network

## Welcome

Research and Practice in Adult Literacies (RaPAL) is the only UK-wide organisation that focusses on the role of literacies in adult life. We promote effective and innovative practices in adult literacies teaching, learning and research; and support adult literacies practitioners and researchers. We enjoy engaging in debates that touch on English language and literacy, numeracy and digital skills across homes, communities and workplaces. Through our members, digital journals, conferences and fora, policy and advocacy work, we are active in Europe and have international links.

## What we do

- Encourage collaborative and reflective research
- Publish a journal three times a year
- Create networks by organising events (including an annual conference) to contribute to national debate
- Believe in democratic practices in adult literacies
- Emphasise the importance of social context in literacies
- Critique current policy and practice where it is based on simplistic notions of literacy as skill
- Campaign for the rights of adults to have access to the full range of literacies in their lives

## RaPAL Officers 2016 /2017

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## Editorial Information

The editorial group for 2016-2017 includes the following researchers, practitioners and practitioner-researchers: Gwyneth Allatt, Claire Collins, Samantha Duncan, Sarah Freeman, Tara Furlong, Julie Furnivall, Sue Lownsbrough, Anne Reardon-James, Irene Schwab, Yvonne Spare, Brian Street and Rachel Stubley.

RaPAL members are involved in the compilation of the journal as editors, reviewers and referees.

We are a friendly group – open to new members and new ideas. Please contact us with any contributions (views, comments, reports and articles) and do not be put off if you are new to the field or if you have not written for a publication before. The journal is written by and for all learners, tutors/teachers and researchers who want to ask questions about this field of work. It does not matter if the questions have been asked before. We want to reflect the many voices within adult literacies work and to encourage debate.

### Why not join us?

Further information can be found at our website: [www.rapal.org.uk](http://www.rapal.org.uk)

The RaPAL Journal is also available from various subscription services: EBSCO, LMInfo and Prenax. The RaPAL journal expresses a variety of views which do not necessarily reflect those of the editorial group. The RaPAL journal was designed by Image Printing Company, Lumsdale, Matlock, Derbyshire



# RaPAL Membership form

## Help us to double RaPAL's membership in 2016/2017!

We are always keen to attract new individual and institutional members. Please join us and consider passing this to friends, colleagues and libraries / resource centres and encouraging them to join RaPAL now!

### Members' benefits

Membership brings:

- three RaPAL journals per year
- discounted attendance at RaPAL events
- participation in the RaPAL JISCLIST

We are happy for our members to participate in the journals and conferences and the organisation and administration of RaPAL.

### How to join

To join, please complete the form on our website ([rapal.org.uk/join-us](http://rapal.org.uk/join-us)). You can also use the form below and email it to [membership@rapal.org.uk](mailto:membership@rapal.org.uk) or post to: RaPAL Membership, c/o Jo Byrne, 8 Phillip Drive, Glen Parva, Leicester, LE2 9US, UK. By joining, you confirm you sympathise with RaPAL's aims as stated in the Constitution.

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Institutional membership allocates two votes at our AGM; and two member participation free or discount at events

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# Editorial

Julie Meredith and Jonathan Mann

Welcome to Journal 90 in which we revisit the subject of digital literacies five years after first exploring the subject in a dedicated edition. If some tweachers - teachers who tweet - are to be believed, digital literacies are a given for teachers. Secondary Head of English Matt Pinkett tweeted, 'It strikes me that selling yourself on the fact that you use IT is a lot like saying, "Hire me. I eat food."' But is this confidence the reality for teaching staff in the post-compulsory sector? And what is the situation for our learners?

In a so-called *information age*, digital literacy is constantly on the agendas of policy makers who note its centrality to contemporary curricula, and teachers who have to identify the best ways to practically implement a seemingly endless swathe of constantly-evolving directives. Exploring the economic impact of the current digital divide in rural communities, the right-leaning Countryside Alliance recently noted that parliament believes 12.6 million UK adults do not possess even the most basic digital skills. Accordingly, they contend, the £63 billion is effectively lost in the UK every year, through untapped digital potential (Countryside Alliance, 2016). That a digital divide also exists in towns and cities makes the matter increasingly urgent. In the context of a connected digital world, the UK's economic losses through digital skill gaps are potential opportunities for other countries. The Conservative government's response, then, is in the form of the Digital Economy Bill, which – it is hoped – will provide much-needed investment in the area. Whether those funds find their way to FE and beyond remains to be seen. Notwithstanding this, the writers in the present edition are able to draw upon their substantial experience in order to provide practical advice on how best to address this problem in educational settings.

Our edition, then, opens in the classroom with four professionals discussing the obstacles – practical, personal and institutional – to developing and embracing digital literacies. **Amanda Easto** is *Banishing Barriers*. She considers the day-to-day reality of introducing technology to Pre-Entry and Entry Level 1 learners and acknowledges her own aversion. She describes how the arrival of Smartboards changed her approach, and shares some successful activities. **Sharon Murphy** explores similar issues albeit with Level 1 learners. She recounts her introduction of iPads and examines their impact on learning, inclusion and confidence. Her piece includes advice and points readers in the direction of a useful resource.

Our next contributor, **Lauren Foster**, challenges the prevalence of bans on MP3 players and mobiles in classrooms as this prevents students from listening to music in sessions. With specific reference to individuals with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD), Lauren explores the benefits of music for learning and wellbeing. She invites institutions to consider flexibility to promote inclusion.

**Chloë Hynes** addresses *The myths and legends of digital literacy: from an ESOL practitioner's perspective*. Does technology belong in the classroom? Are all ESOL learners digitally illiterate? Is technology in the classroom more trouble than it's worth? Is technology a fad? Chloë shares her responses to these questions and digital discoveries from her classroom practice.

From ESOL learners in the Wirral, we move south to Wales then cross the Irish Sea for our next two pieces. **Anne Reardon-James** shares a Welsh perspective and presents the rationale and components of the Essential Skills in Digital Literacy qualification recently made available to adult learners across Wales. Digital responsibility, digital information literacy and digital collaboration are among the six units. Is this qualification the way to tackle digital exclusion and provide people with the confidence and abilities they need to make responsible, informed choices as full citizens?

Our colleagues at the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) in Ireland also provide routes for adult learners to develop digital confidence alongside literacy and numeracy. **Gillian Harris** outlines the role of NALA's Distance Learner Service. She highlights how the service's flexibility breaks down barriers to learning by enabling individuals to study when, where and what they want. Accreditation is optional, which frees tutors from the funding-related focus on qualifications to concentrate on learning.

NALA's students benefit from a virtual classroom. Are there advantages to a virtual staffroom? Our final article is from **Ellayne Fowler** who reflects on the use of blogs within a teaching course for health professionals. She considers whether blogs can lead to the creation of a medical education community of practice and their impact on both reflection and practice.

Our seven contributors' experiences are largely positive. Are yours? Headlines continue to question the impact of screens, in particular, on individuals. Some go as far as to suggest the addictive effect of technology is 'electronic cocaine' or 'digital heroin' (Kardaras, 2016) and various companies now offer retreats for a *digital detox*. From damage to mental health to cyberbullying, do the benefits of digital access outweigh the risks? Almost a decade ago, neurologist Frank Wilson (1999) claimed that 'speaking out against the technofaith has become a kind of heresy'. Is this edition inadvertently

an echo chamber? Share your thoughts and experiences with RaPAL via [Twitter](#), our Facebook page or LinkedIn group.

We are delighted to include three stories from *Resilience: Stories of Adult Learning*, which demonstrate that for these individuals, at least, digital literacies are a plus. **Lizzie Addison** tells us how studying changed her as a person. A partially-sighted student, Lizzie believed she could do more than she achieved at school, and she was right. Next, **Debbie Weldon** recalls how she could not even turn on a computer when she first started studying and was isolated. College helped her build confidence and she explains how the world now feels open to her. The third story is from **Allison Churchill**. The end of a relationship was her impetus to return to learning, and she credits her computer classes with helping her get a lovely job. She now relishes challenges and declares, 'I recommend adult learning to everyone; it really can be life changing.'

From learners' voices we next gain an insight into the working lives of four colleagues in Glasgow. **Donna Moore** describes her work with Glasgow Women's Library. She talks about the charity's vision and the diversity of her own role from supporting learners to write a book about a super-heroine to enabling another to do a crossword. **Maggie McPherson** mainly works with offenders and supports them to turn their lives around. She uses contextualised learning to prepare individuals for vocational roles as well as providing opportunities for them to develop confidence and interpersonal skills. **Debbie Thompson**, meanwhile, is a tutor within the NHS. Her tuition supports staff to brush up on writing, reading, number and basic computing skills. She is also works with staff undertaking NHS training or study programmes and supports those with learning difficulties such as dyslexia. Although she is no longer in a teaching role, **Marianne Miller** says, 'Seeing progress is the main gain' in her post. Marianne manages the full-time staff, sessional staff and volunteers who work for the Literacy Service at Rosemount Lifelong Learning.

We move beyond the UK with the first of our two book reviews. **Ian Cheffy** read John W. Miller and Michael C. McKenna's *World literacy: how countries rank and why It matters*. The authors, two American academics, acknowledge digital literacies but focus on a 'traditional kind of literacy' as they attempt to 'interpret the results of international literacy surveys' for a general readership. Unlike UK newspaper headlines, the writers discourage comparisons between countries and, instead, encourage us to tease out insights. Ian is doubtful that this book deserves a place on your personal bookshelves, but encourages you to borrow it from the library.

Next, **Yvonne Spare** reviews *Social Justice, Transformation and Knowledge Policy, Workplace learning and skills* by James Avis from the University of Huddersfield. Avis considers how the

political economy has an impact on policy for lifelong learning, training and skill development, and vocational education. He flags up contradictions and limitations of so-called progressive policies, for instance, the ‘mismatch’ between the vocations that students are training for and local jobs available to them. Readers also have the opportunity to reflect on changes to college governance, models of staff professionalism, the ‘value’ of different types of work, and the emphasis on education as a route to paid employment. Yvonne considers many of the examples thought-provoking, and reflects his view that the outlook is ‘bleak’.

Our edition closes with **Tara Furlong’s** round up of news from the sector.

Please note that the views expressed by individual contributors to the Journal do not necessarily reflect those of RaPAL.

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## NOTE FROM THE JOURNAL COORDINATOR

Hello fellow RaPAL members

For this edition we have returned to the theme of digital literacies. We suspected that our use of digital technology had greatly increased over the five years since our first Journal on this subject, when it was a relatively new way of working with our learners for some of us. There is a telling description by one of our writers of how it used to be, with learners working in isolation, facing computers lined up facing the classroom walls, which resonated with me as a tutor. With the now widespread familiarity with tablets and other devices, we can see how the whole classroom experience has changed.

If there are those of our readers who are inspired by these writers' accounts to try out this way of working themselves, especially in the field of numeracy, there will be another opportunity to let us know how it goes in the summer when we plan to produce an edition on numeracies as social practice. Perhaps your learners, or indeed you as a tutor, have found this to be a more accessible route into numeracy. Alternatively, you could drop us a note about what you are trying out to our feedback page on the RaPAL website [www.rapal.org.uk](http://www.rapal.org.uk) or via the link on this page. The password required will be the one that has been sent out with the notification of this publication. We are still hoping to receive enough of your responses to be able to print some or to start a conversation on the website.

Any comments about this or other editions or ideas for future content can be sent to [journal@rapal.org.uk](mailto:journal@rapal.org.uk) and don't forget that most Journal editions contain articles by new writers. There are guidelines on our website on the [Write for Us](#) page and we offer as much support as you feel you need to be able to see your writing 'in print' – is there a more appropriate phrase for online writing that gives the same sense of achievement?

Season's greetings from all the team at RaPAL and we hope that you manage to find a few moments during the festivities to enjoy our latest edition of the Journal.

Best wishes

Yvonne