Digital Competence: what's in a name?

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Establishing what digital competence is (and is not) is easier done than said. The concept is a highly debated one, at least in the academic arena: while some speak about digital competence, others refer to digital *literacy*, or prefer the notion of e-skills, or again strongly argue for computer literacy. There are those who defend the fact that digital competence is part of media literacy, and those who on the contrary believe that media literacy belongs to the wider domain of digital competence. All these positions create a jargon jungle not easy to breach, and a proliferation of terms that can sometimes hardly be differentiated. However, leaving the theoretical debates aside, it seems to be quite consensually agreed that digital competence (or literacy, or other related competences and literacies) refers to the ability to use technologies.

If we assume this definition as a consensual one, we should nevertheless recognise that the digitalisation of society implies changes in the connotation of the word 'technology'. Twenty years ago, technology was often understood as a synonym for 'computers', whereas nowadays it embraces media, mobile phones, leisure tools as television sets and video game consoles. The term does not only refer to a wider set of devices than it did for our parents, it moreover implies a number of adapted, new, and fast-changing practices: we do things in a different way than before, and we do things we did not use to do. For instance, a common task as grocery shopping requires a series of tricks and abilities when done online. An obvious example: checking you ordered 2 and not two kilos of bananas, which is a reflection one would not do when physically going to the supermarket, but that becomes a fundamental habit after the first time you receive your unintended and obviously wrong delivery. It can most probably also be claimed that 20 years back no one ever had any doubt (or opinion) on the rightfulness or appropriateness of tagging your boss in a Christmas party picture, especially if taken after midnight. It can be argued that these examples describe the need for common sense rather than the ability to use a digital device. To such a critique, I would reply that awareness, reflectiveness and ultimately common sense are to my understanding the most important and under-developed components of digital competence.

Going back to the choice of a name to be given to this concept, some considerations on the meaning of 'literacy' and 'competence' are probably due. The notion of literacy (the ability to read and write) refers to a basic life skill and is traditionally associated with books and printed matter. It also denotes a decoding and encoding process. Certainly, the ability to read and write in today's society includes digital texts. Moreover, there is a strong encoding and decoding (if not of straight coding!) component in several digital tasks. Nevertheless, as technologies are not just computers, digital literacy/competence is not only about coding, even if understood as 'deciphering'. Although 'literacy' is often used nowadays as an umbrella word to indicate a wide fan of abilities, it seems to me that the term brings a core meaning that deviates from the matter. Instead, 'competence' refers to the categorisation of a discipline in a series of intertwined knowledge, skills and attitudes, the three learning domains envisaged by the famous educational psychologist Benjamin Bloom. Therefore, a discussion on competence rather than literacy brings the focus on the constituting elements of the term,

while taking it away from a highly contextualised notion as 'literacy'. In particular, it underlines the fact that having the 'know how' (i.e. skills, i.e. the ability to do something pragmatically) is not enough. A very basic example: are you able to format a word text? You certainly are, on your computer with your default programme. You know you have to click on a certain icon, choose an option from a scroll-down menu, you perfectly know the path you have to follow (even if probably without a computer in front of you, you will not remember it by heart). But then, one day you find yourself having to use a different computer (or a mobile phone or other device to accomplish the same task), or maybe the technology company updated the software to a higher version, and in doing so you find yourself faced with a different graphic, different menus, different paths. At this point the ability to format becomes as useless as the lack of it. What one needs in this situation is the ability to understand how a programme works, what it can do for you, and how you can find your way around it (or whom to ask if you are really stuck). This is what most educationists call a 'soft skill', or what should more appropriately be called an 'attitude'. Attitudes (one of the three constituting parts of a competence, together with knowledge and skills) are a tricky element in education. If knowledge (especially factual one) can be tested and evaluated, if skills can be checked and measured, attitudes are neither easy to grasp nor record. This constitutes a pitfall in any educational system, where accountability requires providing a judgment on learners' performances. However, attitudes can certainly be stimulated and developed, and this should probably be enough for many dedicated educators. An attitude, for those who still wonder, can be a frame of mind. A perspective. It is the motivation that pushes the performance. Attitudes are the fuel of the digitally competent people of today, what makes them run the extra mile, what makes some people being or becoming competent and proficient users of technology. In psychology, attitudes are understood as 'readiness'. As an anonymous expert stated, a digitally competent person is someone who 'would reach for technology as they would reach for a pencil'. As others would reach for a pencil, I should correct. A digital competent person would write emails instead of making phone calls, have an online calendar instead of a paper one. However, the idea is not that the digital competent person would always choose technology. Rather, the competence would be in knowing what technology can do for you, what it cannot, and in the ability to make informed decisions when opting for a tool, a device, a brand, a service, or software.

In my view, educating people in becoming digitally included and competent has to shift away from the consolidated tradition of teaching them how specific software works (thus fomenting operational skills) and to move towards educating for competence, thus fomenting skills together with knowledge and attitudes. This implies the need to be critical and reflective on what we do with technologies, aware of the possibilities and the risks that technologies offer, and ready to move along technological changes in order to keep up-to-date with the latest developments.

To know more about digital competence and the work of IPTS-JRC on the topic, please see
http://is.jrc.ec.europa.eu/pages/EAP/DIGCOMP.html