

International Literacy Day 2017 Sept. 8th Paris

Speech UNESCO's Special Envoy on Literacy for Development, HRH Princess Laurentien of the Netherlands

Dear Irina, dear Laureates, GAL friends and other friends,

Thank you for Irina so eloquently addressing the importance of digital literacy for society at large. We at GAL work very hard to make sure it is not an isolated issue on the agenda but holistic and integrated in other agenda's.

Today is International Literacy Day. Literacy gives meaning to peoples live and to society.

If you think about it, there is no inclusiveness if we leave people behind who lack the basic skills to read and write.

There is no social cohesion if we leave young people behind.

There is no sustainability without citizens and consumers feeling connected and part of the world.

Being literate in a digital world gives you the essence that you participate and that you belong.

Human behaviour and feelings are the core. Human interaction also.

Learning to read and write has two components: motivation and a set technical skills (recognition of letters, sound and meaning of the words you read). Literacy starts with talking at essence.

Talking is crucial for a child's relationship to language and communications .

There was a CEO of a Dutch tech company who gave me this book: 'Reclaiming conversation, the power of talk in a digital world' written by Turkle. The book opens with a quote of Samuel Jackson, 'we have talked enough, but no conversation'.

Key points of her book;

- it is pro technology but also pro conversation
- Interaction by digital means is mainly clean and linear. Human interaction is messy, unpredictable and takes unexpected turns if we interact. If we interact through digital means only and you don't see the impact of what you have done, your own emotions become more abstract. The interaction becomes a transaction.
- By always being connected we come uncomfortable with silence. In silence we develop our creativity, silence deepens our thinking. Nowadays, people are afraid of being alone. What suffers is then the ability to connect to others.
- We must find the right balance of real and digital, we risk the crisis of empathy which is a core of social interaction in society.

Empathy is the key value that runs throughout the core of UNESCO's work. If we look at the challenges of today cooperation is key. There are so many stakeholders, debates polarized, complex issues. We need dialogue not debate. We need long term thinking rather than quick solutions. We must find a balance when and how to use digital technology.

The book 'Reclaiming conversations' highlights two interesting research pieces;

1. Did you know that when a phone is on the table your brain registers this and it makes your conversation more light, less personal, less engaged?

2. And how perverse it is when we come together in a room to come together for a meeting, finding solutions for complex problems we are not fully engaged because we have our smartphone or laptop with us which draws us to another world? A world where we are not present in the room, where we are closed for unexpected thoughts and dialogues with the other people in the room?

We must realize that in this way multi tasking is unproductive, unhealthy and unbalanced. Disconnecting is now the policy for a lot of companies and organisations so they are present and empathic again for the people around them. UNESCO can lead the way in this because UNESCO is at the core empathy.

Of course, I am pro technology and I see the huge benefits of digital learning. Learning and access to learning to 785 million adults and 250 million children in remote areas where digital technology can produce tremendous effects it very important. We should embrace the digital world; mobile learning is on my list of opportunities is endless.

But don't forget the power of other mechanism of learning; the power of storytelling. So powerful in communities you represent. There is no world without intergenerational interaction. We can use storytelling to transmit love for language. That's how you connect the elder as well. Let's not make digital learning and skills the only parameter. Older generations can provide us something unique; storytelling which has been passed on from generation to generation. In some communities 95% of the people are illiterate. If we try to squeeze literacy training and education through 5% of the literate people we are not making enough progress. Why not use the power of storytelling already present in those 95% to teach and learn others?

I believe in the power of talk. I believe in the power of the digital world. I truly believe the power of talk is crucial for personal development and self-confidence. But think about where in our lives, in our learning in our interaction digital is useful or not. The digital world makes me think; what defines us as human beings? Let's have a conversation about this. We have not even started the proper conversation about this. It is not or/or but finding a balance between the two, digital and the real world.

UNESCO has a fantastic role precisely because you, UNESCO, have the values for true connection to be the leader in this debate where it is digital or not.

I will close off with a true story. I will give you the example of an email send to me 20 years ago. A man, I don't know how he got my address but that's the delightful surprise of the digital world, wrote me an email where he stated;

"Thanks to this computer I can write you this email because before I was not able to read and write. But please, Princess, can you tell me where I can learn self-confidence, because I don't have that."

Thank you all.