

GAME ON!

Building digital literacy in Estonia through play

By **Inger Klesment**

iN RECENT YEARS, game-based learning has increasingly established itself in Estonia and many other parts of the world as an effective method for teaching media literacy to younger age groups. It consistently demonstrates how games and role playing in physical spaces can engage children, empower peer learning, and close gaps in digital media literacy.

Empowering children as digital media educators

Children often excel as experts in internet culture, immersed in ever-evolving trends and slang. My experience shows that involving children in crafting lessons is one of the most effective methods for teaching media literacy. By combining playful approaches with peer-to-peer learning, we can engage students in meaningful ways. This process is not just about fun; it is about leveraging how children naturally process and share information online. They understand their digital world far better than many adults—so why not use that expertise?

Structured school environments provide an excellent opportunity to reach all students, especially those who may not receive adequate guidance on digital media literacy at home. Families often lack the resources or understanding to help children navigate the complexities of the digital landscape. Schools, conversely, bring together students from diverse backgrounds and value systems, creating a space for idea exchange and mutual learning. The real challenge is ensuring that this peer-to-peer interaction is effectively integrated into everyday school life.

Integrating media literacy into everyday lessons

In many schools around the globe, digital media literacy is not a standalone subject. When it is addressed, it often happens in computer classes focused on practical skills such as video editing or text processing. However, there are numerous ways to seamlessly

incorporate media literacy into other subjects, even for younger students.

Take mathematics, for example. Teachers can introduce a puzzle-solving game where students must solve equations to reveal parts of a larger image. Each group uncovers only a fragment, and they must collaborate to interpret what is happening in the scene. Once all the groups have contributed, the teacher reveals the complete image, discussing how misinformation can arise when people only see part of the picture. This teaches students not only math but also critical thinking and media literacy—essential skills in evaluating incomplete or misleading information online.

Physical education classes offer another creative way to integrate media literacy. For instance, students could play a game where they run to collect letters, numbers, or symbols from opponents and use them to create the most secure password possible. Warm-up exercises could involve age appropriate songs and dances from social media trends, which instantly boost engagement. Following the activity, the teacher can have a brief discussion on the importance of verifying the credibility of health influencers on social media. Are they offering sound advice or are their suggestions potentially harmful? Such discussions can even touch on viral online challenges, using the games to illustrate how specific trends, though entertaining, might be dangerous or based on manipulated content.

Language classes, too, provide endless opportunities for media literacy. A simple, interactive game where students move around the classroom asking questions to piece together a story can be transformed into a powerful lesson on communication. The teacher might provide only a single clue at the start, and as the students exchange information, they collectively uncover the entire narrative. This activity can spark conversations about how easily communication can break down online, how influencers might present



opinions as facts, or how context is often lost in digital conversations.

By integrating these kinds of exercises, students not only improve their language skills but also develop a better understanding of how communication functions in the digital age.

What makes a game successful?

One of the biggest challenges teachers face is the lack of time and resources to create new activities for every lesson. That is why I advocate for adapting games that children already know and love, especially those they enjoy during breaks. Familiar games such as tag, hide-and-seek, ball games, or dance competitions can be easily modified to include media literacy components. The key is to keep the

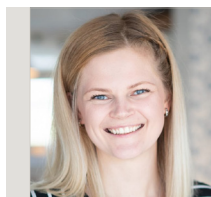
games simple and accessible so that every child, regardless of their background or access to technology, can participate. The joy of playing should be at the heart of the activity; if the rules are too complicated or exclude certain children, then the learning experience loses its effectiveness.

Moreover, allowing children some control over the game—choosing their teammates, selecting a color for their token, or deciding which questions to ask first—can significantly enhance their engagement. These small decisions give them a sense of autonomy and ownership over the learning process. It is no longer about simply following instructions; they feel like active participants in the lesson.

Children's internet culture constantly evolves and is filled with apps, slang, habits, and games that adults often struggle to fully understand. But this is precisely why children should be given space to share their experiences. Instead of teachers spending their evenings trying to keep up with the latest online trends, we should allow students to bring these examples into the classroom. Let them take the lead, explaining what is relevant to their online world, and incorporate those elements into the lesson.

Even when teachers may disapprove of children using certain platforms, how they respond to this reality shapes whether students feel comfortable sharing their true experiences or revert to providing the “correct” answers they believe educators want to hear. Ultimately, what is more important: teaching only the “right” things, or addressing what is truly happening in children's digital lives?

I think we know the answer. Let's embrace playful learning together! ■



Inger Klesment (inger.klesment@ut.ee), a new ILA member, is a media literacy specialist for the Baltic Engagement Centre for Combating Information Disorders, a research project led by the University of Tartu in Estonia.