LITERATURE, DIGITAL MEDIA AND FOOD NARRATION: NARRATIVE APPROACHES AND EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES FOR SUSTAINABLE FOOD LITERACY

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ABSTRACT
In an era marked by the mediatisation of food and the convergence of digital culture and everyday practices, food literacy emerges not merely as a nutritional skill, but as a form of narrative, aesthetic and critical education. This paper explores the interplay between literature, digital media and food storytelling within the framework of the Digital Humanities and eco-literacy, with the aim of outlining educational pathways designed to promote a sustainable, inclusive and reflective form of food literacy.Through an interdisciplinary approach, the essay analyses how literary narratives, blogs, autobiographical writing and narrative video games contribute to building forms of experiential learning based on imagination, empathy and ecological awareness. Literature and digital food storytelling emerge as tools for humanising food knowledge, stimulating a critical understanding of media languages, which are often dominated by consumerist aesthetics and cultural stereotypes.Particular attention is paid to the educational potential of interactive and playful narratives, which, through game-based learning, foster the development of cooperative, ethical and environmental skills. These practices transform food into a relational and intercultural educational tool, capable of connecting emotion, knowledge and civic responsibility.Finally, the paper proposes narrative food literacy as an integrated educational paradigm, in which literature, media and play converge to promote informed food citizenship. Thus, telling stories about, reading about or representing food becomes an act of care, awareness and transformation, the foundation of an education geared towards sustainability and cultural democracy.

KEYWORDS
Food literacy; Digital storytelling; Eco literacy; Narrative pedagogy; Education.

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1. Introduction

In a society deeply influenced by media communication and digital logic, our relationship with food has become increasingly mediatised, complex and symbolically layered. The way in which people learn to eat, cook, choose and share food experiences now depends not only on family and cultural models, but also on communicative processes disseminated through digital texts, images and narratives. Food literacy, originally defined as the ability to gather, understand and use information about food to ensure well-being and health (Vidgen & Gallegos, 2014), must now be reinterpreted in a broader sense: not merely nutritional competence, but also critical and aesthetic education regarding food, capable of promoting awareness, sustainability and active citizenship.

The growing interest in food literacy within the educational sphere is linked to a holistic vision of wellbeing education, which requires the integration of scientific knowledge, cultural sensitivity and social reflection. From this perspective, literature and new forms of digital storytelling represent fertile ground: through stories, blogs, podcasts and narrative video games, discursive practices are emerging that redefine food as a language of identity, emotion and politics (Feldman & Goodman, 2021).

These narratives help to humanise food knowledge, transforming it into an aesthetic and educational experience. As Nussbaum (2010) points out, literature fosters “cognitive compassion”, that is, the ability to understand the complexity of human needs through narrative imagination. Extending this perspective to the field of food means recognising that eating is not merely a biological act, but also a symbolic practice, a process of cultural communication and a form of social learning.

At the same time, a lack of food literacy concerns not only nutritional knowledge but also a limited ability to critically interpret the media’s language of food, which is often dominated by aestheticised, consumerist or stereotypical models. Hence the importance of education in food media literacy, capable of teaching people to read and produce food narratives in an informed manner.

This paper therefore offers a pedagogical and literary reflection on digital food narratives, to demonstrate how blogs, social media, food memoirs and video games can act as tools for sustainable and inclusive food literacy. The course will be structured around three key areas: the theoretical framework of the digital

humanities and eco-literacy as the foundation of contemporary narrative education; the analysis of food-related narratives in new digital media; and the role of interactive narratives and educational games in promoting healthy, cooperative and reflective behaviour.

2. A theoretical interplay between food literacy, digital humanities and eco-literacy

2.1 From food literacy to food citizenship

Over the past two decades, food literacy has established itself as a key concept in the fields of education and public health. According to Truman et al. (2017), it encompasses three levels of competence: functional (the ability to navigate food-related information), interactive (the ability to communicate and negotiate food choices) and critical (the ability to reflect on the environmental, economic and cultural implications of food practices).

In an educational context, this approach promotes an active and transformative approach, in which students do not merely acquire knowledge, but construct identities and values through food-related experiences. Dewey (2008), albeit in a different context, had already emphasised the educational power of experience, understood as a dynamic interaction between the individual and the environment. Today, this perspective translates into practices of food citizenship (Lozano-Cabedo & Gómez-Benito, 2017): citizens capable of making informed, ethical and sustainable food choices.

Literature and digital storytelling are becoming key tools for supporting this process, as they offer emotionally engaging and symbolically rich forms of expression. Through storytelling, students can explore intercultural dimensions and issues of food justice, or gain an understanding of the profound connections between the body, the environment and society.

2.2 Digital humanities and participatory storytelling

The digital humanities broaden the scope of cultural pedagogy, transforming reading and writing into interactive, multimodal and collaborative practices (Berry, 2011; Marino, 2020). In the context of food literacy, they enable the study and practice of food storytelling as a shared educational activity.

Digital food storytelling represents a form of participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006), where the consumer becomes a co-author of the cultural discourse on food.

Through blogs, reels and social media micro-narratives, spaces for informal and inclusive learning are created, in which individual and collective identities are negotiated and represented.

The narrative dimension of digital food-sharing practices can be interpreted as a means of cultural self-education, in which self-narration becomes a tool for reflecting upon and redefining one's daily practices.

These narrative spaces, when pedagogically mediated, can become workshops for critical citizenship, where literary language — even in its digital form — fosters reflection and responsibility.

From an educational perspective, teaching with and through digital narratives means combining digital literacy and critical thinking: critically analysing representations of food in the media, recognising symbols of power and consumption, and learning to construct, in response, more just, sustainable and inclusive narratives.

2.3 Eco-literacy and eco-writing: using storytelling to promote sustainability

Alongside the communicative dimension, eco-literacy (Orr, 1992; Capra, 2007) represents a fundamental educational pillar: it refers to an awareness of the interdependencies between social and natural systems, and the ability to act in support of sustainability. Linking eco-literacy and food means promoting behaviours that respect ecosystems through language, imagination and culture.

Eco-writing, understood as ecological writing or "green" fiction, allows the link between the environment, ethics and everyday food habits to be expressed imaginatively (Heise, 2019). In digital media, short forms such as posts, micro-essays, food poetry or photographic storytelling become tools for raising awareness.

Examples such as the *Food Carbon Literacy* project (Hedin et al., 2022), which uses digital applications to visualise the ecological footprints of food choices, demonstrate how storytelling (whether textual or visual) can also serve as a concrete educational tool. From this perspective, ecological storytelling educates us to perceive food as a connecting link between the environment, health and culture — a viewpoint perfectly consistent with the inclusive and interdisciplinary aims that are increasingly emphasised in educational and digital contexts today (Limone & Rossi, 2023).

In literary terms, ecological imagination invites us to rewrite everyday life in terms of care and solidarity. The narration of food thus becomes both an aesthetic and a political practice: telling the story of what we eat means interpreting the way in which we inhabit the world.

3. Food narratives in digital media

3.1 Writing and learning pathways: from gastronomic memoirs to food blogging

Food narratives have always represented a key point of intersection between physicality, culture and identity. In the contemporary world, writing about food has gradually shifted from books and notebooks to digital platforms, giving rise to a constellation of hybrid genres: personal blogs, food fiction, audiovisual diaries, narrative podcasts and micro-narratives on social media.

These productions — though seemingly far removed from an educational context — hold significant educational potential. Food blogging, in fact, combines autobiographical writing, culinary practices and technical skills. According to Woodhouse & Rodgers (2024), it constitutes an "act of implicit pedagogy", in which the narrator reflects and teaches through the narrated action. When the culinary experience is textualised and shared, it acquires reflective and symbolic value, conveying not only recipes but also worldviews.

In food blogs and memoirs, a genuine pedagogy of taste emerges: the act of storytelling becomes a process of learning about oneself, others and one's surroundings. In the literary and television works of Nigella Lawson and in the writings of authors such as Ruth Reichl and M. F. K. Fisher, culinary language takes on an identity-forming and intercultural function, emerging as a point of intersection between individual sensibility and collective reflection.

At a literary level, such narratives offer valuable material for educational projects focused on inclusion and critical food literacy. Using excerpts from a gastronomic memoir in a school or university setting means teaching students to interpret food not merely as nourishment, but as a cultural code and an affective register. Students thus learn to recognise issues of class, gender and ethnicity in food-related texts — including digital ones — (Counihan & Van Esterik, 2013).

Consequently, the pedagogy of food in the digital context can be considered a form of intercultural narrative education. Writing and reading about food online foster forms of "slow education", in which the time of experience and that of storytelling coincide, allowing for the integration of sensory knowledge and cognitive reflection.

3.2 Food storytelling and media literacy as ways of educating through images, text and emotions

Contemporary food communication is overwhelmingly visual and emotional. Social media, in particular, floods us with images of food and consumption, often presented in an aestheticised and commodified manner. Promoting food literacy in this context also means developing a critical media literacy regarding food, capable of countering the hyper-aesthetic representation of food (Johnston & Goodman, 2015) and of restoring the relational and narrative value of eating.

Online food storytelling combines narrative and representation, drawing on textual, visual and auditory languages. Participatory narrative projects, such as those trialled in UNESCO contexts of education for sustainability, demonstrate that the shared creation of food stories strengthens socio-emotional and cognitive skills (Bartsch et al., 2021). In schools or universities, this practice can become a tool for exploring the connections between food, cultural differences and personal well-being.

It is significant to note how food is increasingly becoming a mediated "relational device": sharing an image of a meal or describing its preparation amounts to constructing a narrative of the self, generating shared beauty, but also participating in a network of meanings. Hence the importance of teaching digital storytelling that educates people to distinguish between the communicative and manipulative value of media narratives about food.

From a pedagogical perspective, a food storytelling workshop can support identity-forming processes, reinforce a sense of community belonging, and stimulate interdisciplinary reflections that bring together language, literature, environmental sciences and educational media. Through the narrative of food — whether written or digital — education thus opens up to the aesthetic, emotional and social dimensions of well-being.

4. Interactive storytelling and game-based learning as educational practices

4.1 The narrative potential of video games in food literacy

In recent years, game-based learning (GBL) has taken on a central role in educational programmes aimed at promoting health and sustainable behaviour. The principle is simple yet powerful: learning through playful and narrative experiences, engaging emotion and curiosity to consolidate knowledge and attitudes (Monacis et al., 2023).

In the field of food education, GBL enables abstract concepts — nutritional values, food origins, environmental impacts — to be transformed into symbolic and relational experiences. Various digital and simulation games, such as *Cooking Mama* or *Overcooked*, although created for entertainment, offer collaborative scenarios in which management, communication and inclusion skills come to the fore.

Even more explicit are games with educational aims, such as *Venb*a, which places the player in the role of a migrant mother in Canada grappling with the task of passing on Tamil culinary traditions to her son. The gaming experience thus becomes an opportunity for intercultural learning and reflection on identity, with food serving as a symbol of memory, belonging and transformation. In Freire's (2022) terms, this constitutes a problematising education, which fosters critical awareness and empathy towards others.

Recent studies (Roth et al., 2025; Gaeta et al., 2014) have highlighted the value of Interactive Digital Narratives (IDNs) as educational tools for developing not only cognitive skills, but also ethical and systemic ones. The interactive dimension allows players to experience the consequences of food choices, revealing the complexity of the relationships between food, the environment and society.

4.2 Narrative, empathy and reflexivity in the pedagogical dimension of play

Digital games can be regarded as a form of performative storytelling, in which the player is not a spectator but the protagonist of the story. This shift is crucial for learning: interaction with the narrative generates what Bruner (2002) termed 'narrative thinking', that is, the ability to understand the world through the plot of stories.

From an educational perspective, the integration of game-based learning into food literacy programmes offers at least three educational benefits:

1. experiential and multisensory learning – virtual simulation allows for the exploration of food practices through the dynamic process of action and reflection;

2. education in cooperation and inclusion – many food-related games are based on teamwork and shared problem-solving (Dewi Aurora et al., 2025);

3. development of ethical and ecological reflection – experimenting with food choices and assessing their impacts fosters the acquisition of eco-agency, a sense of environmental responsibility, in learners.

In schools and universities, these experiences can be incorporated into narrative workshops in which students, after playing, produce reflective essays, reviews or narratives inspired by their gaming experience. In this way, digital practice is brought back into the context of literary education, demonstrating that technology does not stand in opposition to the humanities, but rather renews them.

Numerous studies (Rossi & Limone, 2023) emphasise that inclusive digital learning should not be limited to the use of technological tools, but must be based on a narrative and participatory approach. Game-based storytelling fits perfectly within this vision, as it mobilises multiple languages, promotes collaboration and stimulates critical reflection.

A prime example is provided by the *Food Game Labs* projects developed in some European schools and universities (Chapagain et al., 2023), where students of education, art and communication collaborate on designing games on food-related themes. In these contexts, the game becomes a 'third space' for learning — a place for aesthetic and civic experimentation, where knowledge is constructed through relationships.

4.3 Literature and video games within the framework of narrative pedagogy

Whilst classical literature taught through the written word, today digital interactivity allows us to learn through choice. Both approaches share a common educational goal: to transform the aesthetic experience into ethical awareness.

The continuity between literary text and narrative video games is evident in their structure: both offer a symbolic journey that guides the individual from everyday life to reflection. *Venba*, like a contemporary coming-of-age novel, intertwines family tradition with intercultural recognition; *Overcooked* translates cooking into a metaphor for cooperation and controlled chaos; *Cooking Mama* transforms the repetition of recipes into an affective and disciplinary ritual. These digital narratives are therefore new forms of applied literature.

The use of literary texts on the theme of food, alongside narrative video games, can thus form an integrated educational pathway: from reading a story such as Agnello Hornby's *La Mennulara*, which focuses on culinary and social memory, one can move on to a digital simulation of the act of cooking, and vice versa. This connection fosters experiential learning that combines critical analysis, empathy, communication skills and creativity.

Food literacy, therefore, is enriched by a multimodal and narrative dimension: the storytelling of food becomes an embodied learning experience, capable of engaging the body, mind and emotions.

5. Discussion and pedagogical implications

An analysis of food narratives in digital media and of the educational processes arising from playful narrative interaction shows how food literacy can become a prime setting for intercultural, ethical and inclusive education. Food, understood as a language and not merely as a consumer product, enables educational mediation processes that engage the entire spectrum of human experience: the senses, memory, technology and imagination.

In a media ecosystem dominated by images, storytelling acts as an antidote to perceptual fragmentation. Telling stories about food, whether through literary writing or digital media, means restoring continuity to everyday life, reinterpreting consumption practices in terms of meaning, ethics and care. As Bruner (2002) observes, narrative thinking enables the individual to 'give form to experience' and to construct a sense of self that is consistent over time.

When applied to the field of education, this narrative ability takes on a crucial educational value: it enables students to link technical information (nutrition, health, the environment) to aspects of identity and society. Literature and food stories, including in digital form, therefore provide tools for developing critical and reflective skills, which are essential in an age of information overload and media manipulation of taste.

Critical food literacy becomes an integral part of media education (Buckingham, 2013), requiring not only an analysis of content but also of the power structures and cultural messages implicit in representations of food. The narrative approach supports this objective, combining cognitive analysis with emotional engagement.

In various studies, the inclusive perspective finds a concrete application in food narratives. Food education, when based on stories and narrative practices, can become a space for mutual recognition and respectful dialogue between cultures (Limone & Rossi, 2023).

Stories of migration and culinary exchange, for example, are effective tools for intercultural dialogue, as they link personal experience with collective history, and domestic memory with global history. Educational projects that combine storytelling and cooking, such as autobiographical taste workshops, demonstrate

how sharing stories about food strengthens a sense of community and fosters empathy towards diversity.

Food, in its symbolic value, acts as a mediator between differences, and it is precisely this function that makes it a powerful catalyst for inclusion. The use of digital and interactive narratives also helps to overcome linguistic and sensory barriers, offering everyone the chance to participate in the educational process. This approach is consistent with theories of situated and collaborative learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991), which interpret knowledge as a shared social practice.

Within this framework, food literacy takes on the characteristics of a democratic and dialogical pedagogy in the Freirean sense: narration is no longer the transmission of knowledge, but the co-construction of meaning through language and collective experience.

A further level of analysis concerns the ability of stories — whether literary, digital or playful — to evoke emotions for educational purposes. As Nussbaum (2010) and Illeris (2014) point out, emotions are not antithetical to rationality but form its motivating foundation: learning that engages the emotions is deeper and more lasting.

Food narratives educate through empathy: telling or playing out a story about food means recognising oneself within an ecological system of relationships. This emotional recognition forms the basis for developing authentic eco-literacy, in which the individual not only understands environmental issues but also feels their ethical relevance.

Writing and digital storytelling about food therefore offer ways of learning in which knowledge, emotion and social responsibility merge. It is not simply a matter of educating people to eat better, but of shaping citizens who are sensitive to the value of food as a common good, capable of viewing their daily actions as acts of care towards the community and the environment.

6. Conclusions

The path outlined has shown how, in the digital age, food literacy extends far beyond the informational and nutritional dimensions, emerging instead as a form of cultural, emotional and civic education capable of integrating knowledge, practices and sensibilities. It presents itself as an educational field in which knowledge, the body and language converge to build awareness and responsibility, restoring meaning to the relationship between the individual and the world through the everyday act of eating. The convergence of literature, digital media and

playful practices creates a polyphonic environment in which disciplinary knowledge engages with experience and creativity, offering learning opportunities where the cognitive dimension intertwines with the aesthetic and relational.

Digital Humanities and food storytelling are valuable tools for addressing, from an educational perspective, the new forms of complexity brought about by media saturation, information overload and the spectacle of consumption, but also for interpreting food and cultural inequalities in terms of citizenship and social justice. In this context, food storytelling — whether read, written, played out or shared — becomes a holistic educational experience, in which knowledge is embodied and theory is translated into practice, generating critical awareness and empathy. Educating about food through storytelling means, in fact, creating connections between culture and technology, tradition and innovation, gesture and word, experience and reflection. It is an educational process that integrates digital and humanistic skills, stimulating individuals' ability to read and produce informed media narratives capable of grasping the symbolic and communal value of food beyond its function as a commodity. At the same time, food literacy proves to be a privileged space for the development of affective and intercultural skills: telling and sharing food stories allows us to understand others, to recognise diversity as a resource, and to establish an ethic of care and relationship. From this perspective, food education intertwines with civic and environmental education, becoming a tool for active and participatory citizenship.

In this sense, narrating, depicting or playing with food amounts to practising a form of everyday ethics, an act of responsibility towards oneself, the community and the environment. It is in this context that narrative food literacy can be understood as a pedagogy of inclusion and sustainability, capable of combining personal well-being with collective care.

The prospects for the school of the future, for example, fit perfectly within this framework: food education can become a space for interdisciplinary experimentation where literature, science, art and technology converge in the learning experience, promoting a hands-on, narrative-based approach centred on the joy of learning through discovery and reflection. The integration of digital tools and expressive practices, such as digital storytelling or game-based learning, allows for the combination of media literacy and creativity, developing communicative, collaborative and reflective skills in users. In this way, the 21st-century school can become a space for co-designing education, where teachers, educators, students and the local community cooperate in constructing shared narratives on food and sustainability, moving beyond disciplinary fragmentation in favour of situated, experiential and widespread knowledge. Food education thus becomes a vehicle for well-being and ecological awareness, but also an opportunity to foster a sense

of belonging and responsibility towards the planet. Educating about taste and the storytelling of food means fostering complex thinking, teaching slowness and care, and restoring centrality to the sensory and symbolic dimensions of knowledge.

Ultimately, narrative food literacy proposes a paradigm of integrated self-development — cognitive, aesthetic, digital and relational — capable of combining competence and sensitivity, knowledge and humanity. Educating today, as Rossi and Limone (2023) point out, means building bridges between languages, experiences and technologies; but above all, it means restoring to knowledge the capacity to generate meaning, community and hope. In this vein, the school of the future could take the form of a 'narrative community of taste', a place where food becomes a metaphor and a practice of coexistence, a tool for learning not only how to nourish oneself, but how to live together in a conscious, sustainable and creative way.

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