Media Literacy: Eight Guidelines For Teachers

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Writing What You Read

Modern literacy has always meant being able to both read and write narrative in the media forms of the day, whatever they may be. Just being able to read is not sufficient. Being able to actively create rather than just passively consume new media is important for the obvious reason that it teaches literacy and job skills that are highly valued in a digital society. But two less obvious reasons are equally important.

First, hands-on media creation plays an important role in the development of media literacy—the ability to recognize, evaluate, and apply the techniques of media persuasion. "Writing media" compels reflection about reading media, which is crucial in an era in which professional media makers view young people largely in terms of market share.

Second,the lag time between being able to read media and being able to write in those media is shrinking quickly for the non-elite. Historically, new media first appear to the vast majority of us in read-only form. The rest of us only evolve into writers once the new media tools become easy to use, affordable, and widely available. Text took many centuries, audiovisual information took roughly one century, and Web narrative took about 15 years. Thus, a new dimension of literacy is now in play—namely, the ability to adapt to new media forms and fit them into the overall media collage quickly and effectively.

Eight Guidelines For Teachers

A strong case can be made that commanding new media constitutes the current form of general literacy and that adding the modifier digital is simply not necessary anymore. Whether or not this is the case, digital literacy warrants a central focus in K–12 learning communities. Eight guidelines can help teachers promote the crucial skills associated with digital literacy.

1. Shift from text centrism to media collage.
General literacy means being able to read and write the media forms of the day, which currently means being able to construct an articulate, meaningful, navigable media collage. The most common media collage is the Web page, but a number of other media constructs also qualify, including videos, digital stories, mashups, stand-and-deliver PowerPoint presentations, and games and virtual environments, to name a few.

As part of their own intellectual retooling in the era of the media collage, teachers can begin by experimenting with a wide range of new media to determine how they best serve their own and their students' educational interests. A simple video can demonstrate a science process; a blog can generate an organic, integrated discussion about a piece of literature; new media in the form of games, documentaries, and digital stories can inform the study of complex social issues; and so on. Thus, a corollary to this guideline is simply, "Experiment fearlessly." Although experts may claim to understand the pedagogical implications of media, the reality is that media are evolving so quickly that teachers should trust their instincts as they explore what works. We are all learning together.

2. Value writing and reading now more than ever.
When we write, we think. We slow down and reflect as we struggle to synthesize, clarify, and communicate. This struggle has always been a part of writing, but it is amplified within the context of the social Web, in which we must also become active readers and editors of one another's materials and mindful contributors to group expression. Effective writing has a new kind of importance for students in what can often be a digitally distracted world.

Those worried about the fate of text in the era of the media collage can rest assured that writing is more important than ever for two other reasons that might not be immediately apparent. First, crafting text for the Web highlights the importance of written expression by recasting it in a more compact, concise form. Although essays are still of consequence, when we encounter them on a Web page they often appear as walls of text, unscalable to all but the few who are truly inspired by their content. In contrast, effective blog or Web page writing requires using visually differentiated text, which makes onscreen reading easier by using a number of formatting conventions, most notably the 6 Bs: bullets; boldface; breaks; boxes; beyond black and white (using different font colors); and "beginnings" (providing the first paragraph of a longer piece and a hyperlink to the rest, rather than forcing readers to scroll through what they may consider to be lengthy, irrelevant material).

Both essay writing and blog writing are important, and for that reason, they should support rather than conflict with each other. Essays, such as the one you are reading right now, are suited for detailed argument development, whereas blog writing helps with prioritization, brevity, and clarity. The underlying shift here is one of audience: Only a small portion of readers read essays, whereas a large portion of the public reads Web material. Thus, the pressure is on for students to think and write clearly and precisely if they are to be effective contributors to the collective narrative of the Web.

The second reason that writing is important in the era of the media collage is that it is almost always the pathway to effective media creation. Digital stories, movies, documentaries, and many new media narrative forms require clear, concise, and often highly creative writing as a foundation. The saying, "If it ain't on the page, then it ain't on the stage" is just as true today as it was before the digital world arrived.

3. Adopt art as the next R.
I have witnessed more digital art taught by computer-savvy teachers than by art teachers. To understand how dire this situation is, imagine computer technicians rather than language arts instructors teaching writing because of the former's advanced understanding of word processing technology.

As we consider the shift away from text centrism, it is clear that many of the skills needed to command the new media collage would, by today's school standards, fit best into an art curriculum, where concepts of color, form, and collage are part of the everyday narrative. Unfortunately, art—including music, drama, and the other arts—is largely viewed by K–12 education as, at best, an elective, and at worst, fluff to discard when money gets tight and No Child Left Behind bean counters bring high-stakes testing pressure to bear on school communities. Digital literacy demands that we treat art as the next R, just as important as the traditional 3 Rs. This is one of the most pivotal shifts in literacy that the digital age has inspired, and we should not deny our students these important literacy skills.

4. Blend traditional and emerging literacies.
Our throwaway culture is unrelenting in its desire to make room for the new at the expense of the old. However, a well-rounded approach to the new media collage requires blending a number of literacies, both traditional and emerging, into a cohesive narrative.

Currently, many media collages are based on the four components of "the DAOW of literacy": Digital, Art, Oral, and Written. Being able to understand and blend the best of the old, recent, and emerging literacies will become a hallmark of the truly literate person.

Of the four components of the DAOW, oracy—the ancient literacy of speaking and listening—deserves much more focus than it currently receives. It is central to many of the media collage forms currently in wide use, including storytelling, narrated documentaries, movies, PowerPoint presentations, and even games and virtual realities. And it is central to leadership as well. After all, we often look for evidence of leadership in the way that people speak to others.

5. Harness report and story.
As new media emerge that must be incorporated into the media collage, the need for metaforms of narrative to bind them together becomes more acute. One kind of metaform can be described by a continuum that is bounded by report on one end and story on the other.

In their most stereotypic forms, reports and stories differ in terms of information structure, use of creativity, and level of audience engagement. Reports are typically linear information presentations that employ little creativity and inspire little emotional engagement, focusing instead on objective research and critical thinking. Stories, on the other hand, use a more creative, nonlinear information construct composed of the elements of tension, transformation, and resolution. The result is that stories engage us and communicate with us in ways that reports do not.

The demands of digital literacy make clear that both research reports and stories represent important approaches to thinking and communicating; students need to be able to understand and use both forms. One of the more exciting pedagogical frontiers that awaits us is learning how to combine the two, blending the critical thinking of the former with the engagement of the latter. The report–story continuum is rich with opportunity to blend research and storytelling in interesting, effective ways within the domain of new media.

6. Practice private and participatory social literacy.
In the mid 1960s, Marshall McLuhan explained that conventional literacy caused us to trade an ear for an eye, and in so doing, trade the social context of the oral tradition for the private point of view of reading and writing. To him, television was the first step in our "retribalization," providing a common social experience that could serve as the basis for dialogue in the global village.

However, television told someone else's story, not ours. It was not until Web 2.0 that we had the tools to come full circle and produce and consume social narrative in equal measure. Much of the emerging nature of literacy is a result of inexpensive, widely available, flexible Web 2.0 tools that enable anyone, regardless of technical skill, to play some part in reinventing literacy.

The new media collage depends on a combination of individual and collective thinking and creative endeavor. It requires all of us to express ourselves clearly as individuals, while merging our expression into the domain of public narrative. This can include everything from expecting students to craft a collaborative media collage project in language arts classes to requiring them to contribute to international wikis and collective research projects about global warming with colleagues they have never seen. What is key here is that these are now "normal" kinds of expression that carry over into the world of work and creative personal expression beyond school.

7. Develop literacy with digital tools and about digital tools.
In practical terms, access to citizenship is largely a function of literacy. This is not a new concept. Jefferson wrote copiously about the need for an educated and literate public if democracy was to succeed. What is new is that the tools of literacy, as well as their effects, are now a topic of literacy itself.

Students need to be media literate to understand how media technique influences perception and thinking. They also need to understand larger social issues that are inextricably linked to digital citizenship, such as security, environmental degradation, digital equity, and living in a multicultural, networked world. We want our students to use technology not only effectively and creatively, but also wisely, to be concerned with not just how to use digital tools, but also when to use them and why.

Topics such as the environmental effects of living a technology-enhanced lifestyle and the social costs of the digital divide provide important subject matter for project-based learning that involves science, social studies, and other curriculum areas. Having students research the personal, local, and global implications of these issues will help them place technology within the larger perspective of community and reevaluate their idea of what it means to be successful. Having them address these issues in school will show them that the goal of education is to produce not only capable workers, but also caring, involved, and informed neighbors and citizens.

8. Pursue fluency.
During the industrial age, the desire for literacy for the masses was for basic literacy—just enough to enable most people to operate the machines that the fluent few designed and developed. But in an era in which literally anyone with a laptop and an Internet connection can be a well-educated entrepreneur, we need to look beyond general literacy to fluency.

Fluency is the ability to practice literacy at the advanced levels required for sophisticated communication within

social and workplace environments. Digital fluency facilitates the language of leadership and innovation that enables us to translate our ideas into compelling professional practice. The fluent will lead, the literate will follow, and the rest will get left behind.

Digital fluency is much more of a perspective than a technical skill set. Teachers who are truly digitally fluent will blend creativity and innovation into lesson plans, assignments, and projects and understand the role that digital tools can play in creating academic expectations that are authentically connected, both locally and globally, to their students' lives.