

Literacy for the 21st century: the hope and the promise essay



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Since the beginning of recorded history, the concept of “ literacy” meant having the skill to interpret “ squiggles” on a piece of paper as letters which, when put together, formed words that conveyed meaning. Teaching the young to put the words together to understand (and, in turn, express) ever more complex ideas became the goal of education as it evolved over the centuries. Today information about the world around us comes to us not only by words printed on a piece of paper but more and more through the powerful images and sounds of our multi-media culture.

Although mediated messages seem to be self-evident, in truth, they use a complex audio/visual “ language” which has its own rules (grammar) and which can be used to express many-layered concepts and ideas about the world. Not everything may be obvious at first; and images go by so fast! If our children are to be able to navigate their lives through this multi-media culture, they need to be fluent in “ reading” and “ writing” the language of images and sounds just as we also teach them to “ read” and “ write” the language of printed communications.

In the last 40 years, the field of media literacy education has emerged to organize and promote the importance of teaching this expanded notion of “ literacy. ” At its core are the basic higher-order critical thinking skills of any well-educated person - knowing how to identify key concepts, how to make connections between multiple ideas, how to ask pertinent questions, formulate a response, identify fallacies and so on. It also expands the concept of “ text” to include not just written texts but any message form — verbal, aural or visual - (or all three together!) - that is used to pass ideas between human beings.

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And full understanding of such a “ text” involves not just “ deconstruction” (analysis) activities but also “ construction” (production) activities using a range of multi-media tools now available to young people growing up in today’s media culture. So, media literacy is not about discarding geography in order to have time for making videos; it’s not about dropping Shakespeare in favor of Spielberg. Media literacy is just named that way until the day comes when the definition of “ literacy” automatically incorporates the idea of fluency in both print and non-print forms.

Information Explosion But there’s more. Kathleen Tyner says in her landmark *Literacy in a Digital Age*, that media literacy or media education is more about education than it is about media! What she means is that the goal of media literacy is not so much to study what’s on television, how advertising works or how to make a movie (although it can include those activities) as it is to explore how human beings can interpret (“ read”) and “ make sense of” the complex media culture in which we swim.

A multi-media message can be the “ text” under discussion but the skills to be learned include questioning how an image is composed, analyzing what it might mean to different people, evaluating it against other concepts and principles I believe in and ultimately developing and creating a response (“ writing”) so that others can know what I now know. At the same time that our multi-media culture is expanding the notion of “ text” to be analyzed, the proliferation of technology is transforming how human beings acquire knowledge and pass it to one another.

No longer do we need to accumulate all the information we may need for a lifetime. What we need to know is how to find and then manage the information needed at a particular time for a particular task. We need to know how to process the information that we can now so easily retrieve through technology. This explosion in information has presented a major challenge to the world of formal education. For centuries, schooling has been designed to make sure students learned facts - which they proved they knew by correctly answering questions on tests.

But such a system no longer works when facts-for-life are not needed! What is needed today is for students to learn how to learn, how to find what they need to know when they need to know it. And to have the thinking skills to critically analyze and evaluate whether the information they find is useful for what they want to know. How will schools do this? First, schools and classrooms must be transformed from being storehouses of knowledge to being more like portable tents providing a shelter and a gathering place for students as they go out to explore, to question, to experiment, to discover!

Secondly, to use a phrase from the great Brazilian educator, Paolo Freire, teaching must be distinguished from "banking." No longer is it necessary for teachers to deposit information in students' heads. Teachers no longer have to know all the answers, to be a "sage on the stage." Instead teachers are becoming a "guide on the side:" encouraging . . . guiding . . . mentoring . . . supporting the learning process. Creative classrooms today are ones where everyone is learning, including the teacher!

Thirdly, curriculum, classes and activities must be designed that will engage students in problem solving and discovery, in learning how to learn. Some call it “ inquiry-based learning. ” Using today’s multi-media culture, which includes print but is not limited to it, provides a nearly limitless resource for acquiring a range of skills, e. g. how to identify “ point of view” by examining how camera angles influence how we think about the subject being photographed or how to determine whether information is bogus or not by learning to evaluate websites on the Internet.

The transformation of our culture from an Industrial Age to an Information Age is why a new kind of literacy, coupled with a new way of learning, is critical in the 21st century. At the Center for Media Literacy, we hope that the theory and practice of media literacy education, along with the resources, information and networking available at this website, will provide the framework — and the tools — to bring the promise of an empowering 21st century literacy to every child, every home, every school in America.