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Multiliteracies for a Digital Age. Stuart A. Selber.
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At my home institution, we are experiencing a transition from sporadically using computers in the classrooms to using technology as part of our pedagogy and to delivering classes online. Since my university's mission statement includes preparing our students for technological literacy for the twenty-first century, and since our state's tax-payers approved a proposal securing funding for developing distance learning courses and programs, we have funds for technology training and online course development. Our system administrator and campus center for teaching and electronic learning provide training opportunities and promote faculty work through faculty showcases, but I also want to influence hardware and software decisions as well as the integration of pedagogical and technological tools. I am not, however, always prepared to give thoughtful suggestions or to participate fully in discussions about the benefits of specific technological tools. For faculty, administrators, and staff who are in a similar situation as I am, and for graduate students whose work will include teaching writing with technology, Stuart A. Selber's *Multiliteracies for a Digital Age* is not only a must read but a much-needed incentive to think beyond currently accepted theories and practices in the field of computers and writing. Selber's book gave me the language I needed to articulate my own ideas more successfully and more succinctly in my interactions with administrators. It also pushed me to think about technological literacy as an interconnected system that is based in rhetoric, forcing me to rethink my understanding of functional, critical, and rhetorical technological literacies.

Readers who will benefit most from Selber's book are those who are interested and excited about digital literacy and who are ready to move beyond the practical and theoretical applications currently used in the field. These are the readers who remember, for instance, Cynthia Selfe, Gail Hawisher, Paul LeBlanc, Charles Moran, and Lisa Gerrard's¹ call for using technology as part of *social action*. These are the readers who are ready to begin imagining what the practical and theoretical implications of rethinking technological literacy might look like for themselves as well as for their students. Selber's book is one of the texts that bridges

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¹ Gerrard, Lisa. (1996). Preface. In Gail E. Hawisher, Paul LeBlanc, Charles Moran & Cynthia L. Selfe (Eds.), *Computers and the teaching of writing in American higher education, 1979–1994: A history* (pp. ix–xii). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

technical and professional writing with foundational and explicit rhetorical principles; it helps faculty to participate and perhaps improve campus-wide discussions on technological use; and it helps faculty to move from the usual back-seat driving—behind the technical and scientific fields most apt to benefit from practical technological advances—to the driver’s seat, making informed decisions about technology and the uses of technology for educational purposes and workplace literacy.

Selber states in his preface, “this book provides heuristic approaches that combine practice and theory in ways that are meaningful to teachers of writing and communication” (p. xii). Rather than a set of rules or standards, the heuristic approach that Selber offers can be modified for various writing situations and levels of student-stages. Throughout the book, Selber addresses a wide range of pedagogical possibilities by focusing on the approach and theoretical frameworks that influence how we see ourselves as faculty practitioners of technology-enhanced teaching in the classroom. If we simply believe, for example, that the computer is more than a tool, then we fail to acknowledge that the computer *is* still a tool to learn and to control. Because technology often is decided on and managed from outside of the humanities, *how* faculty in the humanities approach—in thinking about it and in practicing it—technologically enhanced writing instruction will in turn determine how the faculty practitioner approaches the administration. This conceptual and practical connection of the faculty’s approach to the hardware, software, and administration is a complex thread that Selber explains effortlessly in his work.

Throughout the chapters, Selber takes time to “unpack” his ideas and theories, to define concepts, and to offer his own classroom practices as examples of what a possible heuristic approach may look like. This combination of analysis, theoretical discussion, and reflection is especially useful for readers who are facing a changing campus landscape from hard copy, email, and computer labs to acknowledging the multiliteracies (face-to-face and online) that exist in a digital age. Selber’s discussions of the larger contexts (from theory to classroom practices to administrative decisions to workplace literacy) in which digital literacies are placed and practiced provide readers with the necessary background to understand how technological literacy impacts education and workplace literacy. Readers will not only find useful examples for their own teaching (i.e., teaching students how to name files; why and how to turn off the word processor’s grammar checker; how to make the most use of Microsoft and other software products), but they will also find reminders of and encouragement to take decisions for technological implementation seriously and to work with administrators on incorporating the most pedagogically and methodologically sound technologies in specific teaching environments. Selber states,

Humanists often have estranged or uncomfortable relationships with technology, yet neither indifference nor paralysis are acceptable options nowadays. In fact, an important role for English departments is to help position human-computer interaction as essentially a social problem, one that involves values, interpretation, contingency, persuasion, communication, deliberation, and more. (p. 235)

This is a call for action that is much needed at my own institution.

“Chapter 1: Reimagining Computer Literacy” addresses the computer myth and the challenges to our current understanding of how, as writing and communications teachers, we ought

to approach technology. This approach provides the novice reader with the necessary background to understand Selber's explorations of technological literacy in later chapters. It also encourages the seasoned reader, who may "know" the context of computer literacy implicitly, but who does not know how to present and discuss such knowledge explicitly with faculty and administrators unfamiliar with the field of computers and writing, to rethink her approaches to defining, analyzing, and explaining technological literacy. Computers as tools, as cultural artifacts, and as hypertextual media are three broad areas that faculty who research technological literacy issues will recognize. Furthermore, readers will also understand Selber's use of literacy categories (i.e., the *functional*, *critical*, and *rhetorical*) that serve as the foundation for his pedagogical focus. As Selber points out, students need to be *effective users* of technology, *informed questioners* of technology, and *reflective producers* of technology. These categories are organized, accessible, and useful for all *stages* of readership. Selber does not assume his reader ought to know nor does he talk down to his reader who may know. An example of Selber's ability to present and to expand on a discussion is when he points out that "neither an overemphasis on accommodation practices nor on resistance theories will result in a computer literacy program that is comprehensive, innovative, and relevant. For such a program to come about, a postcritical stance is needed" (p. 7). He returns to the concept of postcritical stance throughout the book, encouraging teachers to critically examine the new or *old* pedagogy we use, what we include, and how we envision technology in the humanities in a larger context as well as in our individual classrooms. Selber's first chapter, in other words, provides a well-balanced and accessible approach to practice and theory in a world of multiliteracies.

Chapters 2–4 are especially useful for teachers of writing and for those involved in working with teachers. Selber provides one of the most lucid discussions on functional literacy currently in the field in his second chapter. He argues that we should not assume students come with computer skills, that indeed students must learn functional computer skills, and teachers of writing ought to design the parameters of a functional approach to computer literacy. This particular chapter is intriguing because Selber examines the "tool" metaphor and its usefulness for using computers in conjunction with the teaching of writing. At a pragmatic level, according to Selber, if faculty accept that computers are tools, then the computer is something to learn and to control at a functional level. Once controlled, the tool can be used for various tasks. To clarify his points about functionally literate students, Selber offers a set of parameters (such as educational goals, social conventions, specialized discourses, management activities, and technological impasses) that help programs develop their own goals for functional technological literacy. Similarly, Selber provides such parameters for a critical and rhetorical approach to technological literacy, making it easy for teachers to follow a blueprint that can be adapted in their own programs.

Selber revisits the over-arching concepts that are the foundation for his argument throughout his chapters. For instance, his clearly laid out tables serve as the *brief* of a larger discussion that he then explains carefully in the chapter. He briefly shows the reader that functional literacy includes an understanding of *educational goals*, *social conventions*, *specialized discourses*, *management activities*, and *technological impasses*. Later on in the chapter, he explains more fully that these interrelated skills do not stay isolated with functional literacy. These approaches to computer literacy are useful for administrator's needs but also are the very real world of multiliteracies our students live with and will work with. In other words, the student will not

only learn the practical function of the tools but will also learn how the tool is shaped by social conventions, what discourses are associated with the tool, how to manage a digital tool, and how to ask questions about the technology rather than allow the technology to remain *innocent* and allow it to be designed as neutral, always implying that the user is at fault. The discussion of what overlaps and what interrelates is central to Selber's argument. Humanists, he tells us throughout the book, are important in the larger discussion of technologically enhanced classrooms.

Selber discusses and lays out which technology skills overlap, which skills ought to be taught in isolation, and which technological myths may be obstructive in the continuous design of digital literacy applications. Selber not only supports his claims by providing readers with a plethora of resources, but he also uses diverse research materials to make his chapters interesting and credible for a wider audience beyond the traditional field of rhetoric and composition. For example, "Chapter 5: Systemic Requirements for Change" asks faculty to approach the larger campus with a "systemic perspective" rather than a local one. With a systemic perspective, argues Selber, change is possible but is very flexible, "fragile," and interrelated. Because university campuses have many "forces" at play, Selber conceptualizes requirements for a systemic change as "an assemblage of nested contexts, a conceptualization in which an increasingly broad set of forces is implicated and no single context can be understood in isolation from the others" (p. 184). The nested contexts that are interrelated include the technical, pedagogical, curricular, departmental, and institutional contexts. By presenting these nested contexts, Selber reminds his readers of what they may know but haven't known how to address: "It should come as no surprise, however, that teachers of writing and communication are not at the top of the list when universities consult with their faculty and staff about technical requirements, even those connected to literacy" (p. 194). As a reader, and as a faculty member who currently *can* approach administrators about technological needs and observations, I recognized that I have not attempted to understand the larger nested contexts of my classroom and my department. My questions now include how my department fits with the rest of the college and why we are not sharing computer labs and funding. I start my questions with "I just read this book on" to administrators who are cash-strapped and who are therefore open to ideas that are inclusive of many students and not specifically tied to one teacher's assignments.

As with many of Selber's points of discussion, he uses his own teaching to reflect and to provide examples for his discussion. For example, he points out that he teaches his students to think about and to question the grammar checker. Rather than use the cause and effect approach (where the cause of the green underline means the writer is using poor grammar), Selber teaches his students to think and to question in a systemic way. He points out—and I have seen this with my own students—that many students believe the only way to stop the green underline is to write grammatically correct sentences rather than turning off the grammar checker. Students, as Selber says, mostly have bought into the logic of the grammar checker as if it could possibly adapt to style, purpose, and audience, or to the rhetorical context underlying the specific writing situation.

As obvious as the example may seem to some faculty, I find that the simplicity of this example is its strength. Many times, we do not question basic software functions, or we do not think to remind our students that they have control over seemingly predetermined key functions. I do not want to imply that Selber's work is merely a matter of revealing what many

faculty may already know implicitly. I find that each chapter is so well written that readers will not be able to put the book down easily. The conceptual connections, the discussion layers, the definitions of terms, and the entire complexity of the chapters' discussions are presented with great ease and great depth of thinking. The ideas, the conclusions, and the encouragement he provides to readers are complex and wonderfully realistic. They are applicable for those who are at the beginning stages, in a transitional stage, and, I would argue, especially for those who see technological integration into the writing classroom as largely accomplished.

Selber recognizes that engaging with interrelated campus forces as well as changing our approach to technologically enhanced pedagogies is not easy. He reminds his readers that "one of the larger questions for teachers will be how to scaffold instructional activities that illuminate the relationships and interdependencies between these multiple literacies" (p. 25). He begins to formulate an answer to his own question by offering theoretical frameworks, practical approaches, and a vision for future work. His last chapter anticipated my own response to his four chapters, "But, how might we actually scaffold such activities?" As he points out, we need to accept the connections between functional literacy skills and the larger social and humanistic possibilities not only because we *should* but because we *must* as humanities teachers.

I recommend Stuart A. Selber's *Multiliteracies for a Digital Age* because he approaches multiliteracies as part of a larger context and because he breaks down that context by engaging in rigorous research, reflection, and critical analysis. His encouragement for humanities teachers to believe they can and ought to participate in digital literacy discussions moves technology from the functional to being socially and culturally influenced. He makes clear that students should learn to control, to adapt, and to question rather than to allow the technology to remain neutral. I recognize this call to critically analyze and to question technology is not new in the field of computers and writing, but Selber's discussion prompts us to dust off knowledge we might have forgotten. More importantly, he prompts us to reorganize and redesign our knowledge to incorporate current changes and challenges. This book is a timely one, and it is just what our field needs as new computers have more bundled template-oriented multimedia programs that make it easy for students to submit multimedia projects for their assignments. With Selber's work in hand, multimedia end-products will benefit from teacher-taught basic rhetorical principles and critical analysis.

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