

# Stuart A. Selber

## *Multiliteracies for a Digital Age*

### Book Review

—Reviewed by  
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**Index Terms**—*Computer literacy, humanities, technology education, writing pedagogy.*

**S**tuart Selber's project in *Multiliteracies for a Digital Age* productively bridges two fields that would intuitively seem to resist bridging: humanities education and computer literacy. Selber's approach is not overly ponderous or theoretical beyond any application; rather, he first provides the exigencies for treating computer education and computer literacy as humanistic and critical endeavors. He then develops pragmatic and professional heuristics for, primarily, teachers of writing and communication in departments of English. I say "primarily" because in academic and professional publishing, it is often unclear how scholars and practitioners might respond to a particular piece of work from their own contexts and perspectives. The book will also be useful for curriculum-development committees, graduate students in writing studies, and researchers in professional communication. Selber's *Multiliteracies* provides an opportunity to reflect on some of those academic-industry gaps, especially, in this case, when the material deals with such pressing concerns as 21st-century technology applications, the people who use them, and the people who teach them.

Selber begins in Chapter 1 by asking readers to reexamine accepted uses of the concept "computer literacy," and, by focusing on the history of computer-literacy programs in order to "characterize the consequences and contexts that so frequently get overlooked in such programs, to discuss at least some of the reasons for this neglect; and to make a few initial proposals about what might be needed in order to create better alternatives" [p. 3]. The computer-literacy histories are telling, and this is one of the areas that should sound familiar to both academics and working professionals: Colleges and universities increasingly depend on computer-literacy

requirements that emphasize the decontextualized, naturalized, and value-free *tool* aspect of technologies, including familiarity with proprietary operating systems such as MS Windows and Office; an "assessment test to determine [students'] level of computer expertise;" and by extension, deficiency [p. 15]; and other efforts that effectively remove ethical decision-making and studies of technology-use consequences from the curriculum.

Selber's primary-research materials in these contexts reveal consistent applications of such instrumental approaches to technology education across schools with different student populations and different educational missions and visions. Such "skill requirement" [p. 20] initiatives are often the result of pressure and advocating from external sources such as university advisory boards, accrediting agencies, and "corporate interests" [p. 21]. Rather than dismissing the needs and influence of professional and corporate interests, however, which is sometimes the case in humanities education, Selber instead develops a framework for educating the "multiliterate student" [p. 22] who can move beyond impoverished senses of the mere functionality of technologies to play active roles in broader, generative, ethical, civic, and social technology experiences. The multiliteracies framework broadens the skills approach to include functional literacy, critical literacy, and rhetorical literacy.

### FUNCTIONAL LITERACY

Selber addresses functional literacy "in a way that diverges both philosophically and structurally from the established approaches teachers of writing and communication have come to distrust" [p. 31] about skills-based representations and instantiations of literacy. For example, he shows how an out of context "nuts-and-bolts" approach to literacy [p. 32] has actually undermined *responsible* forms of teaching and learning, resulting in a "blunt tool" [p. 33] that adds to the deskilling of students, teachers, and future knowledge workers. But since another of Selber's projects in *Multiliteracies* considers previous theories fairly—about both writing and about

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technology—without dismissing them out of hand in favor of newer approaches, he is able to discover some interesting and rarely discussed aspects of “functional” approaches to literacy and learning, and to put them into historical context. Selber shows how earlier, WWII-era formations of functional literacy were often based not on mere skills but on the needs of particular groups (a *social* aspect of technology work that is diminished in contemporary usage); the ability of students to create “new meaning” [p. 33] in the widest, not just technological and deficient senses; and the ability to effect positive, cultural benefits. Selber resolves these seemingly intractable skills-based approaches in contemporary use by developing the first part of his multiliterate framework around an expanded, more active version of “functional” literacy parameters in which students can engage:

- **Educational Goals:** using computers to achieve educational goals;
- **Social Conventions:** understanding social conventions that determine computer use;
- **Specialized Discourses:** understanding and making use of discourses associated with computers;
- **Management Activities:** effectively managing her or his online activities;
- **Technological Impasses:** using strategic approaches to confront, rather than to circumvent, collaborative and technological problems.

Each of these parameters expands upon previous notions of functional literacies that encompass, and seem embedded, in computer environments. At the levels of language (the humanities connection) and production (the technological context), they highlight moves toward responsibility and exploration, rather than institutionally prescribed lists of skills. This approach also highlights subsequent chapters that address how technology and language work has become untethered to critical approaches and appears, in many educational settings, fully de-rhetorized.

## CRITICAL LITERACY

The goal of a critical literacy in Selber’s view is to discover how “students might be encouraged to recognize and question the politics of computers” [p. 75]. This is no small task, especially if students have been raised, trained, and reinforced to see computer technology as value-free tools and as instrumental pathways to professional success. This is an area where humanities education and English teachers have not been particularly successful, not due to the lack of critical efforts but because of the institutional and political contexts that function to promote entrepreneurial and functional approaches to technology education. Selber is aware of these contexts and constraints and acknowledges that a

critical approach to computer literacy will result in “an uncomfortable line of questions” that “challenges the values of the status quo” [p. 81].

Rather than setting up a critical computer literacy as necessarily oppositional to either functional approaches or, in fact, to students’ own goals, Selber designs an integrated educational model of analysis and critique that avoids unproductive binaries. Drawing especially on the notion of computers as metaphorical influences and “cultural artifacts,” students are able to move beyond functional notions and to ask how metaphors influence thinking about writing in professional and academic contexts and, regarding technology, how they can understand the forces that have led to their own computer literacy. This may take the form of asking to what extent their computer-based educations have been intellectually generative, and to what extent they have been encouraged to explore the inevitable “unintended consequences” [p. 86] of their computer use and technology-rich educations. This line of reflective thinking extends to asking students how they might imagine themselves as negotiating their lives and careers as “social critics” or as “indoctrinated consumers of material culture” [p. 95].

The multiliterate framework for the critical literacy approach scaffolds nicely and builds upon the previous chapter’s functional approach. Students both learn about and learn to act upon these critical-literacy concepts:

- **Design Cultures:** understanding how dominant perspectives shape technological cultures and artifacts;
- **Use Contexts:** understanding how contextual forces—institutional, educational, social, corporate—are inseparable from computing infrastructures, including “courses, computer classroom spaces, and curricular requirements” [p. 111];
- **Institutional Forces:** understanding how concepts such as standardization, regularization, and redistribution practices are configured, and by whom;
- **Popular Representation:** interrogating representations of computers in the public imagination.

As a teacher in the humanities at a technological university, I found myself imagining how students from different disciplines—computer science, engineering, business, communication—might engage in these critical and technological activities. One of the first things to notice is how Selber’s educational and computer-literacy initiatives demand some level of creativity in their applications. Selber’s design is “suggestive rather than restrictive” [p. 24], and does not require a checklist approach to integration. In fact, it resists that very approach and, instead,

encourages us to explore technology in its most useful contexts, as both a productive and a rhetorical art.

## RHETORICAL LITERACY

Scholars and researchers are still working through theoretical and practical connections between technology and rhetoric. As subjects of humanistic studies, technology and rhetoric have a lot in common, etymologically and in practice. Selber's linking of rhetorical and computer literacy suggests several possible avenues for research and teaching. In the spirit of his linking the humanities and technology, I suggest that readers approach this chapter by first asking the broadest possible questions: what is the current role of higher education in the US? What is the role of humanities education within higher education? What is the role of technology and computer literacy within the humanities?

Configured like this, the most important and productive areas for teaching, research, and learning come right to the forefront: weighing professional development in more historically "reflective" fields such as the humanities and the liberal arts; deciding what we mean by "text," "context," and "reader;" and making departments of English (for example) relevant in technological contexts. Selber's proposals and parameters for rhetorical literacy are designed to confront these issues in institutional, social, and classroom environments. Specifically, rhetorical literacy in its role as a multiliteracy promotes these qualities:

- **Persuasion:** understanding that persuasion is imbedded in all interface design, implicitly and explicitly;
- **Deliberation:** understanding, in the sense of deliberation as a parameter of rhetorical invention, that design problems are inherently ill-defined and require alternative forms of intervention;
- **Reflection:** understanding and practicing knowledge-making activities and seeking critical assessments;
- **Social Action:** understanding and promoting design as a form of social versus technical action.

While Selber depends largely on technical examples to expand on rhetorical literacy points (interface design, visual design, human-computer interaction), the combined forces of technology, rhetoric, and literacy that underlie his project point to even larger and transformative possibilities.

As educational programs work through and implement multiliteracy approaches in the humanities and technology curriculum, Selber's and local efforts should lead to more meaningful connections between scholars in the humanities and professional settings, where the work of rhetoric is most explicitly enacted. Readers who want to make compelling pedagogical connections between Selber's versions of computer literacy and contemporary literacy studies will benefit from reading his *Multiliteracies* alongside the New London Group's (NLG) *Multiliteracies: Literacy Learning and the Design of Social Futures* [1]. Like Selber, the NLG collection aspires to concepts such as "transformed practice" [1, pp. 30–32], "critical literacy" [1, p. 4], and a "multiliteracies pedagogy" [1, pp. 239–248]. Since both Selber's and the NLG's projects depend on understanding technological change in social, educational, and economic contexts, the books deserve to be considered together.

*Multiliteracies for a Digital Age* is written in a straightforward and concrete style, with an emphasis on pragmatic concerns and solutions. This is pragmatism not in decontextualized and de-rhetorized practical senses, but in the richer sense that the *OED* describes as "dealing with social and political problems primarily by practical methods adapted to the existing circumstances, rather than by methods which have been conformed to some ideology." Readers will also appreciate the explanatory tables that accompany each of the three logically sequenced chapters on literacy, which present Selber's heuristics in a visually comprehensible style, and the numerous examples of assignments and student technology-experience diagnostics for classroom use.

Selber begins his book with a quote from Neil Postman's *The End of Education: Redefining the Value of School*: "Technology education is not a technical subject. It is a branch of the humanities" [p. 1]. He concludes with reflections on the nature of change, and the challenges—technical, pedagogical, curricular, departmental, and institutional—that humanities scholars and teachers will need to confront in their research and teaching. As graduate students in English studies and in technical and professional communication encounter Selber's book as part of their graduate education (it should be assigned there), we will see even more closely linked studies between broadened notions of computer literacy and the humanistic enterprise.

## REFERENCES

- [1] B. Cope and M. Kalantzis, Eds., *Multiliteracies: Literacy Learning and the Design of Social Futures*. New York: Routledge, 2000.