

*Multiliteracies for a Digital Age*. By Stuart A. Selber. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004.

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Reviewed by Clay Spinuzzi  
*University of Texas at Austin*

Most of us can agree that computer literacy is something our college students need to learn, our workers need to master, and our children need a head start in acquiring. How could we help agreeing with that? After all, *computer literacy* is so vaguely defined, so variably used, that few of us could avoid seeing a benefit. Like the term on which it is based, *literacy*, computer literacy is a moving target that resists a uniform classification or measurement. This phantom quality makes computer literacy useful for justifying long-term educational initiatives and funding technology investments. But it also keeps us from making much headway on the issue in our universities. If we cannot agree on what constitutes computer literacy, we cannot formulate curricular goals and objectives, nor can we establish appropriate pedagogical practices. So we have long needed a book such as *Multiliteracies for a Digital Age*, in which Stuart Selber pins down “computer literacy” by rearticulating it as—let’s remove the scare quotes here—computer literacies.

Selber is one of the most active and respected scholars in two related subfields, technical communication and computers and writing, so he is a natural for the task. That becomes clear even in the first few pages, in which he surveys how computer literacy has been addressed in universities in general and in English programs in particular. In general, the picture is not pretty: That phantom computer literacy has been addressed primarily by investing in technology infrastructure, without investing commensurately in education, resulting in survey courses that are primarily functional and marginally useful. To give us an idea of how marginally useful these courses are, Selber reproduces course requirements and parts of syllabi. Unless your idea of computer literacy involves learning about the capacity of floppy disks and the difference between bits and bytes, you will probably be disappointed in them. As Selber says, these courses simply do not address rhetorical concerns or help students develop rhetorical judgments, even at the level of developing file-naming schemes or writing appropriate e-mails (p. 20).

In English programs, computer literacy is often addressed critically but unevenly. Although early work in computers and writing tended toward the Panglossian, later work has focused on critiques of how computer technologies have perpetuated and instantiated inequities. Neither of these approaches, Selber says, have done students much good. He argues instead for a postcritical stance: Computers are here to stay, so “the time and energy of teachers is therefore best spent not deploring computers but learning how to use them in ways that align with, and productively challenge, the values of

the profession" (p. 8). In this postcritical stance, teachers are encouraged to reconfigure technologies; adapt them to their own needs and pedagogies; and even design them, when possible, to meet pedagogical objectives and to address societal inequities.

But for such an approach to be successful, we have to stop talking about computer literacies and instead discuss computer multiliteracies. To that end, Selber develops a conceptual landscape of literacies that he forecasts neatly in the first chapter and treats methodically in subsequent chapters. In doing so, he develops a framework that draws together diverse strands of computer literacies, puts them in relation to one another, and demonstrates how they can be integrated conceptually and pedagogically. The strands include functional, critical, and rhetorical literacies.

Functional literacy, discussed in chapter 2, tends to portray computers as tools and students as users, with the goal of effective employment. This strand of computer literacy has been derided by critics as simple tool use, and Selber acknowledges that if it is uncritically applied, it can often turn into a skills-based course (like the university-level computer literacy courses I discussed). Such courses tend to serve employers at the expense of students. But applied postcritically, as Selber applies it, functional literacy can empower. Selber systematically dissects functional literacy and demonstrates how it can encompass educational goals, social conventions, specialized discourses, management activities, and technological impasses. His many examples from his own and others' classes help us gain a concrete understanding of the measures we can take in our own classrooms without losing sight of our pedagogical goals or turning into glorified technology tutors.

Functional literacy leads us to critical literacy, discussed in chapter 3. Critical literacy portrays computers as cultural artifacts and students as critics of technology, with the goal of informed critique. Selber sees much gold in current critical approaches to computer literacy, but also much dross, so he devotes considerable time to constructing a systematic approach to critique. Again, he draws together threads from many types of critique and presents them in ways that allow us to see how they might interact in our curricula. Specifically, he suggests that a critical approach should teach students to investigate design cultures, examine use contexts, identify institutional forces, and critique popular representations. Each of these is explained in great detail, making this the longest chapter of the book, and again illustrated with examples from Selber's and others' pedagogies.

Finally, critical literacy leads us to rhetorical literacy, discussed in chapter 4. Rhetorical literacy sees computers as hypertext media and students as producers of technology, with the goal of reflexive praxis. In this strand, we move from the functional use and critical investigation of technology to the rhetorical construction and design of it; students are expected to be not just users and critics but designers. And Selber proposes that they be taught how to perform

that design work through a grounded understanding of persuasion, deliberation, reflection, and social action. In an age when practically anyone with an Internet connection can design Web sites, blog, or contribute to Wikipedia, this infrequently addressed strand of computer literacy seems more sorely needed than ever. Personally, I was pleased to see that Selber draws on human-computer interaction and related work in technical communication here, given our field's commitment to the productive construction of technology.

These three strands of computer literacies, carefully rewoven and rearticulated, together provide a complex but understandable account of computer literacy on which pedagogical theory and practice can be based. That alone makes this an important book, and I hope that it will be studied by anyone who puts together a curriculum in computers and writing, professional writing, or related fields. But Selber also discusses how computer multiliteracies can be pragmatically implemented at various levels of the university. In the last chapter, he discusses the systemic requirements for changes in technological contexts. As in the other chapters, he deals with the subject matter systematically, starting with technical and pedagogical requirements before moving to the curricular level and finally the departmental and institutional levels. And in his detailed and careful descriptions, Selber demonstrates how our work can scale these computer multiliteracies—and what changes it needs to undergo as it moves from one literacy to another.

The book's main contribution, as I have said, is its systematic framework and the ways in which that framework is elaborated in terms of pedagogy and curriculum. But the book also presents innumerable anecdotes, examples, and tips from one of the most engaged and informed teachers in the field. Granted, sometimes these are a bit thick on the ground, and sometimes I wondered how Selber's students made their way through all of the things he asked them to do in the first week alone. But these exercises are inspiring in their simplicity and apparent effectiveness—and surprisingly well integrated with the multiliteracies framework he proffers.

My main criticism of the book—and it is a relatively small one—is that Selber tends to talk about negative actors who are just as vague and phantasmagoric as computer literacy. Offhand mentions of “power elites,” “social forces,” and the like tend to pop up here and there but are never concretely developed. If Selber had chosen to shine his light on these shadowy phantoms, as he did on the phantom of computer literacy, perhaps they would have similarly been revealed as definable problems to be addressed with specific solutions. Doing so would have helped further develop the concluding chapter because these social forces surely have impacts on the university at all levels and could be addressed with other systemic requirements.

Overall, *Multiliteracies for a Digital Age* is timely, thought provoking, and useful. It provides a thoughtful, readable, systematic guide to thinking about

computer literacy that should be valuable to anyone developing a class, course, curriculum, or campuswide initiative. How many books can you say that about?

*Technical Communication and the World Wide Web*. Eds. Carol Lipson and Michael Day. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2005.

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Reviewed by Amanda Metz Bemer  
*Iowa State University*

*Technical Communication and the World Wide Web* is a broad title, and thus this edited collection of essays appropriately encompasses a broad range of topics associated with technical communication and the Internet. More specifically, discussions in this text elaborate several ways pedagogical views should change to better approach technical communication's relationship with new and constantly changing technology. Editors Lipson and Day propose three foci for curricular changes caused by and relating to (a) the information architecture and database requirements of the Internet, (b) the Internet's complex legal copyright situation, and (c) the global nature of the Internet (p. 13). In addition, a few chapters specifically address implications for introductory and online technical communication classes. Chapters included in the text effectively address issues and implications "from the community college level to the graduate level, from service courses to degree programs" (p. 14) through both specific suggestions and broader discussions of pedagogical implications.

The need for this collection of essays is discussed by Rice and Papper, who provide several ways that pedagogical changes are absolutely necessary for students' future workplace success: Their argument will convince readers that the changes addressed by other authors in the book are worth careful consideration. In this spirit, Rice and Papper's essay may be better placed at the beginning of the text rather than toward the end. Nonetheless, in chapter 14, they vigorously advocate that with the Web's integration into their lives, technical communicators must be able to communicate in all formats and understand how these formats work together. To make their point, Rice and Papper invoke Kress's (1998) "Visual and Verbal Modes of Representation in Electronically Mediated Communication: The Potentials of New Forms of Text." They remind readers once again that the medium is the message. The mode we use to communicate our messages affects the way readers interpret messages. For example, individuals reading an article in a newspaper will read that article differently from the way they would read it on a Web site. They may skim an online text more than a print text. Therefore, given the