

BOOK REVIEWS

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Multiliteracies for a Digital Age, by Stuart A. Selber, Carbondale: SIU Press, 2004, 269 pp.

The computer has become ubiquitous, and there appears to be a commonly held belief that computing technology must be embraced by writers and writing teachers. Rarely is it made explicit in extended discourse, however, how these modern technologies should be used, and how these technologies might be taught. *Multiliteracies for a Digital Age*, part of the notable Studies in Writing and rhetoric (SWR) series established by the Conference on College Composition and communication in 1980 [1], fills this gap. The book examines understanding and use of computers within the field of composition, and is designed, as is stated in the first sentence of the preface, "to help teachers of writing and communication develop full-scale computer literacy programs that are both effective and professionally responsible" (p. xi). As is indicated from the beginning, the book is designed to serve as both a theoretical framework and model for practical application.

In the introductory chapter, "Reimagining Computer Literacy," Selber attacks common myths associated with the use of technology, specifically computers, in the classroom and in composition studies. As he suggests, computers are often viewed as the solution to all problems, but this view commonly ignores underpinning theoretical structures. We often view technology as an end, rather than as a means to an end. With reference to Cynthia Selfe's *Technology and Literacy in the Twenty-First Century*," Selber explains that technology and literacy are

intertwined (p. 14). No matter how we view composition studies, he suggests, modern students will likely use available technologies as an integral aspect of their writing process. By teaching functional, critical, and rhetorical awareness of these technologies, we can enable both ourselves, and our students, to be more effective writers and thinkers. We can, as the title suggests, become multiliterate in a digital age.

Selber defines his view of computers as postcritical—"one that locates computer literacy in the domain of English studies while operating under the assumption that no theories or positions should be immune to critical assessment" (p. 3). This view informs the three chapters at the heart of the text. In order, they focus on functional literacy, critical literacy, and rhetorical literacy. Each chapter considers the computer through the lens of a different metaphor. The chapter on functional literacy examines the computer as a tool, the chapter on critical literacy examines the computer as a cultural artifact, and that on rhetorical literacy considers the computer as hypertextual media (p. 25). The book concludes with a chapter entitled "Systemic Requirements for Change" in which Selber outlines models for the practical application of the three literacies.

FUNCTIONAL LITERACY: COMPUTERS AS TOOLS, STUDENTS AS EFFECTIVE USERS OF TECHNOLOGY

Selber defines functional literacy through the use of the "computer as tool" metaphor—that is, a device with the explicit function of aiding students and teachers of composition. The chapter considers "Competing Visions of Functional Literacy" (p. 32), "Computers as Tools" (p. 35), and the "Parameters of a Functional Approach" which include "Educational goals" (p. 44), "Social Conventions" (p. 51), "Specialized Discourses" (p. 55), "Management Activities" (p. 61), and "Technological Impasses" (p. 67). He initially addresses arguments which suggest that functionalist approaches are primarily used to "dehumanize" students (p. 32), and then moves to consider arguments which hold that technology is neutral (p. 38). Once we realize the value systems inherent in technology, the tool metaphor becomes a more meaningful metaphor for computing technology. Selber suggests that while "the tool metaphor deemphasizes the political and constitutive aspects of technology, it encourages an attention to task objectives, task contexts, and the values and perspectives of the discipline" (p. 44). Viewed in this way, functional literacy can enable students to become more productive users of computing technology. As he points out, a computer is more than just a glorified typewriter, and a functional literacy allows students (and teachers) to more fully engage with their material.

The chapter on functional literacy contains several useful sections, among them discussions on how to contextualize functional literacy (pp. 50-51), an excellent discussion on resource management based on an e-mail filter management assignment from Selber's own classroom (pp. 62-67), and a functional heuristic for

overcoming the occasional impasse (p. 71). As Selber suggests, teaching functional literacy from within English classrooms allows students to contextualize their knowledge of technology for what most of them will inevitably use their computers—writing.

CRITICAL LITERACY: COMPUTERS AS CULTURAL ARTIFACTS, STUDENTS AS INFORMED QUESTIONERS OF TECHNOLOGY

Critical literacy is approached through the use of the “computer as cultural artifact” metaphor. By teaching critical literacy, Selber suggests that we can encourage students “to recognize and question the politics of computers” (p. 75). The chapter considers “The Contributions and Limitations of Constructivism,” “the Aims of Critical Literacy” (p. 81), “Computers as Cultural Artifacts” (p. 86), and then explores four parameters for a critical approach to critical literacy: “Design Cultures” (p. 106), “Use Contexts” (p. 111), “Institutional Forces” (p. 117), and “Popular Representations” (p. 125).

This chapter will be particularly useful for any professional who wishes a greater understanding of constructivism, or any instructor who wishes to provide a class with modern perspectives of constructivism in association with consideration of modern technologies. Briefly stated, Selber offers a succinct definition of constructivism as “a philosophy of learning based on the premise that learning is an active process in which students construct new knowledge based upon their current/previous knowledge” (p. 76). This definition is then explained and refined throughout the chapter in relation to the idea of critical literacy, and, as a result, becomes one of the high points of this text.

In addition to this examination of technology as a socially constructed artifact, Selber continuously shows the need for English departments to stay current with the technological arbitrators of academia. As he points out, it is necessary to stay informed of modern technologies, and the myths with which they are associated, while also reminding technology arbiters that departments have different technology needs. In the end, he suggests that we remember that “users—not employees or technicians—should define their own relationships with computing infrastructures” (p. 122).

RHETORICAL LITERACY: COMPUTERS AS HYPERTEXTUAL MEDIA, STUDENTS AS REFLECTIVE PRODUCERS OF TECHNOLOGY

Rhetorical literacy is approached through the “computer as hypertextual media” metaphor. As Selber states, “this chapter assumes that one facet of a computer multiliteracies program should prepare students to be authors of twenty-first century texts that in some measure defy the established purview of English departments” (p. 139). The hypertextual media metaphor recognizes this, and asks

students to reconsider linearity and human-computer relationships. This chapter considers interface design, which Selber feels “should be an enterprise the discipline influences because there is so much at stake in the representations of literacy online” (p. 140), and then considers “The Parameters of a Rhetorical Approach” (p. 144), which include “Persuasion” (p. 146), “Deliberation” (p. 152), “Reflection” (p. 156), and “Social Action” (p. 161). The structural metaphor for the chapter is then examined at length in relation to “Nonlinear Text” (p. 168), “Modular Nodes” (p. 172), and “Associative Links” (p. 176).

This final chapter elucidating the theoretical underpinnings of the idea of multiliteracies in a digital age does an excellent job of juxtaposing the ideals of classical rhetoric with twenty-first century tools. As Selber points out in relation to David Jonassen’s work, “the more associations that individuals can form between old and new knowledge, the better their understanding of that new knowledge is likely to be” (p. 179). It becomes apparent that while students (and teachers) may need to restructure their perceptions of linearity, classical rhetoric is certainly applicable to computer use and the online environment.

SYSTEMATIC REQUIREMENTS FOR CHANGE

The final chapter of this text is concerned primarily with the practical application of the three literacies. In it, Selber discusses “Technical Requirements” (p. 192) and examines “Pedagogical Requirements” (p. 199) by “Positioning Teachers as True Learners” (p. 201), “Evaluating Student Experiences and Attitudes” (p. 202), and “Understanding Pedagogy and Technology as Coextensive and Mutually Constitutive” (p. 206). He then examines “Curricular Requirements” (p. 210) programmatically (p. 213), course by course (p. 221), and in relation to individual assignments (p. 222). He concludes with a discussion on “Departmental and Institutional Requirements” (p. 224).

Selber argues (convincingly) that while “computers have produced an enormous number of positive changes in higher education [. . .]. The trouble with such an unqualified claim is that it grants a level of autonomy to technology that simply does not exist” (p. 223). He suggests that by examining, or reexamining, our conceptions of computer literacy in relation to functional, critical, and rhetorical literacy, we can then institute changes that will lead to increased levels of awareness, productivity, and understanding.

Conclusion

I have taken care in this review to refer to the numerous sections of *Multiliteracies for a Digital Age* by their section headings and provide page numbers where appropriate. Selber’s Works Cited list is an excellent resource in and of itself, and each section of the book contains a functional literature review on the associated topic. While his use of personal anecdote and experience may not

always be applicable to every reader, his experiences in this field is extensive, and therefore justifies his use of personal reference throughout the text. It is also useful to note that each chapter contains well-designed tables which outline the concepts covered. These tables function effectively to both prepare and guide the reader.

I found this text to be well researched, insightful, and quite user-friendly. I would recommend this text to anyone looking for new perspectives on rhetoric in a digital age, and would also suggest sections of this text as classroom discussion material, particularly the discussion on constructivism in chapter three.

In the end, perhaps one of the greatest lessons to be taken from this book is an awareness of how humans and computers are now intertwined. As he suggests, "the problem with so many approaches to change is that they reduce a system to its parts but ultimately neglect the relationship of the parts to the whole" (p. 188). *Multiliteracies* does a good job of providing a big picture and systematic framework from within which to examine each aspect of modern literacy.

REFERENCE

1. *Studies in Writing and Rhetoric*. 7 Sept. 2005.
<http://www.unl.edu/SWR/pages/indexhome.html>

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